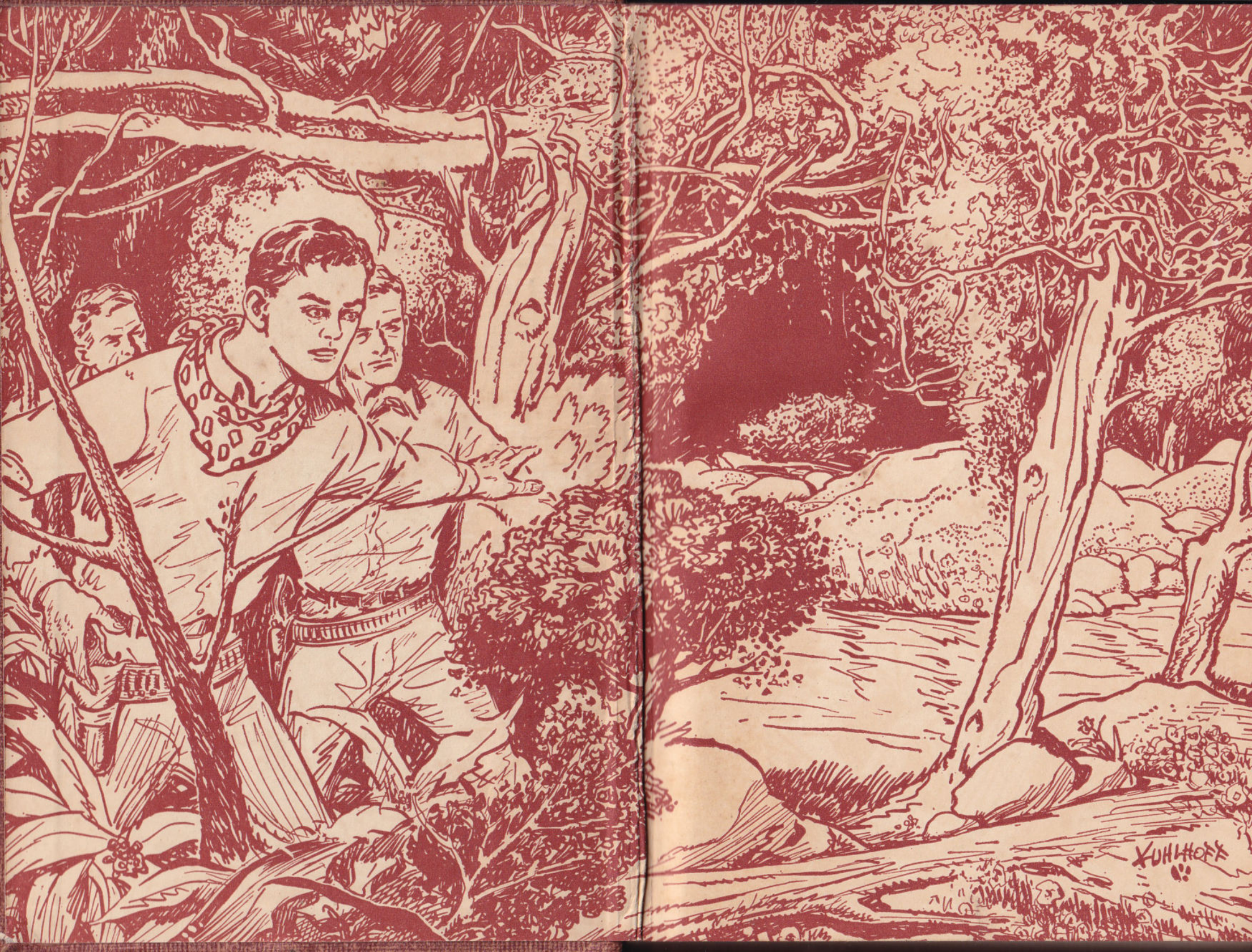
A TOM QUEST ADVENTURE

THE SECRET OF THUNDER MOUNTAIN

FRAN STRIKER

ROSSET & DUNLAP

A TOM QUEST ADVENTURE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THE SECRET OF THUNDER MOUNTAIN

BOOKS BY
FRAN STRIKER

☆

The Tom Quest Adventure Stories

SIGN OF THE SPIRAL
THE TELLTALE SCAR
THE CLUE OF THE CYPRESS STUMP
THE SECRET OF THE LOST MESA
THE HIDDEN STONE MYSTERY
THE SECRET OF THUNDER MOUNTAIN

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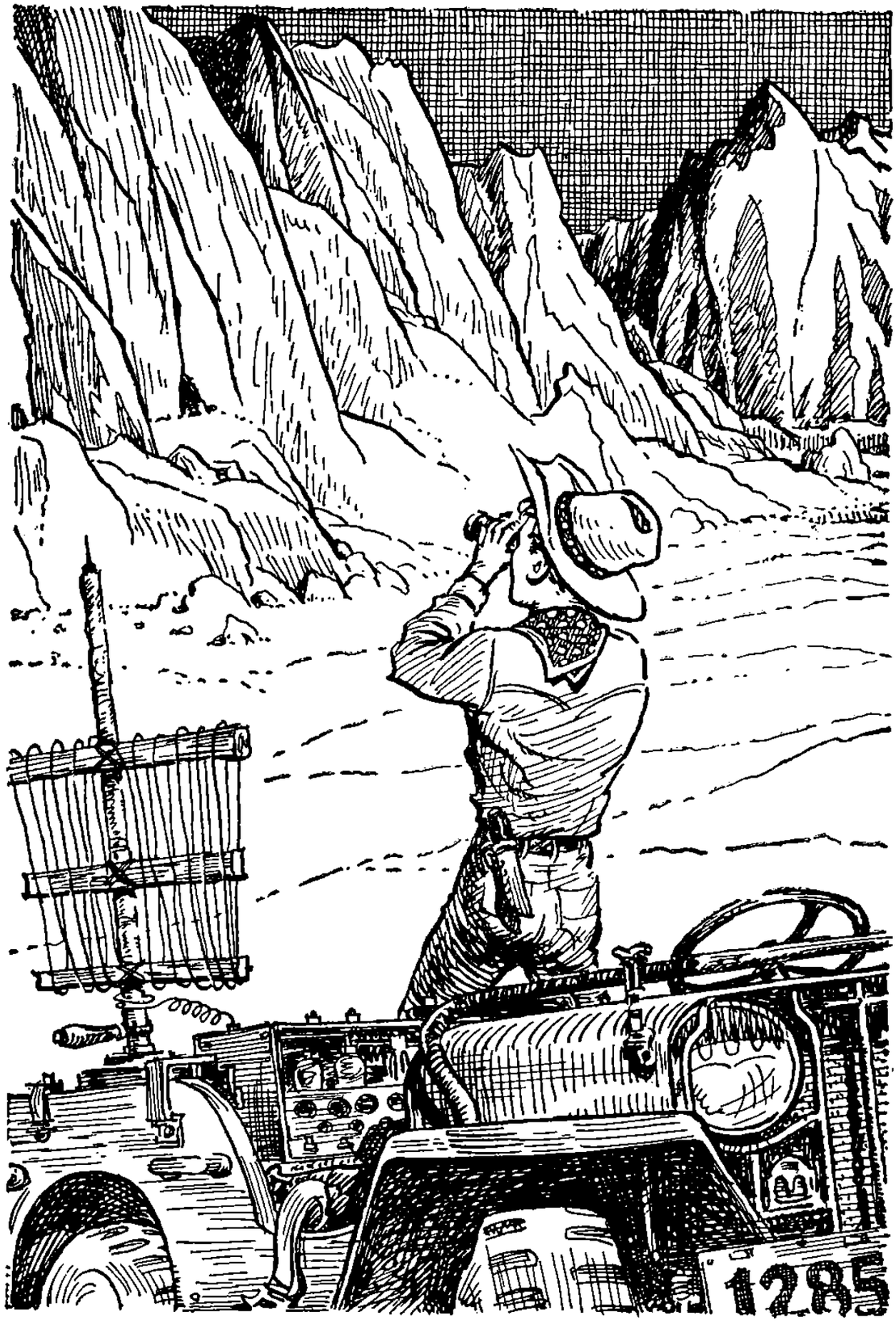

Suddenly Tom saw something he had never noticed before

A Tom Quest Adventure

THE SECRET OF THUNDER MOUNTAIN

BY

FRAN STRIKER

Grosset & Dunlap *Publishers*

NEW YORK

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THE SECRET OF THUNDER MOUNTAIN

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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THE SECRET OF THUNDER MOUNTAIN

CHAPTER 1

A Package of Trouble

GULLIVER'S JEEP bounded across the Texas plain on a beeline trip to Bliss. The steering wheel was nearly lost in Gulliver's huge and hairy hands, and his foot held the accelerator flat against the floor.

The rugged car had been "souped up" for greater speed and stripped of all things Gulliver considered non-essential. The motor roared for lack of muffler, and the windshield had long since been discarded because it interfered when Gulliver took pot shots at jack rabbits and small game.

The wind didn't seem to bother Gulliver. His heavy eyebrows hung like a protecting hedge over his deep-set eyes. The boy at his side wore goggles. He sat with every muscle relaxed. Tom was just past seventeen, young enough to be Gulliver's son. But Tom Quest's adventures and expeditions, as well as a life spent largely out

of doors, had broadened his shoulders and hardened his muscles.

When Gulliver drove to town he habitually ignored the highway because of his simple conviction that a straight line was the shortest distance between two points. There were two turns in the state road, so the big man preferred the straight-line route cross-country.

The jeep took off from a hummock. For an instant all four wheels were in the air at one time. It landed with a jarring *thud.*

"Yo', Tom!" shouted Gulliver above the motor's roar, "still got that package?"

Tom glanced at the small, carefully wrapped box on the floor between his feet and said, "Still with us."

For two weeks Tom Quest had been a visitor on Gulliver's ranch. His father had sent him there ostensibly to rest and had given Gulliver explicit instructions to see that the boy relaxed after his harrowing experiences among the Mandan Indians, as related in "The Hidden Stone Mystery."

Tom's "rest" included long hikes and trips on horseback, and with typical enthusiasm he had entered into all the muscular activities of a small cattle ranch. He had ridden outlaw horses, practiced roping, and had even taken a few spine-rattling lessons from Gulliver in the bulldogging of steers.

On one occasion Tom had saddled a horse and started out alone at daybreak to visit Thunder Mountain, which could be seen rising in the distance from one room of Gulliver's ranch house. He had brought back a saddlebag full of rock specimens that struck him as peculiar. Half of these specimens were packed in the box at his

feet, addressed for mailing to his father in New York.

Neither Tom nor Gulliver had any reason to suspect that those geologic samples would prove to be the key to the mystery of Thunder Mountain, or that robbery, murder, and a powerful criminal organization contributed to the peculiarity of the rocks that had aroused Tom's curiosity.

Gulliver whipped the jeep in a tight turn from field to highway. He drove for half a mile on smooth road, then jammed on the brakes in front of the general store in Bliss.

Tom stepped over the side of the car and reached in to pick up his package. Gulliver's exit was accomplished by stepping through the place where the windshield had been, to the hood of the car, then to the bumper and the ground.

"Hey, Joe!" he bellowed as he slapped open the door. "Where yo' at?"

Joe was standing less than three feet away with his back to the door as he sorted a handful of mail into the proper pigeonholes of a high rack. Gulliver's voice had a certain quality—something like that of a buzz saw operating on a sheet of rusty tin. It played havoc with the nerves of most people, and Joe was no exception. His narrow shoulders shuddered from the impact. He gritted his teeth and winced. He pulled the mail from one of the pigeonholes, turned, and placed it on the counter.

"Not much today," he said somewhat apologetically. "Just a letter for Tom from his father an' a postcard for you. It's from that newspaper friend of yours—Whiz Walton. He says it's good to be back in New York."

"Readin' my mail again, eh?" complained Gulliver.

"Postcards don't count," Joe said.

Gulliver handed Tom the letter and stuck the postcard into the hip pocket of his dungarees. "Tom," he said to Joe, "wants to send out a package."

The postmaster took the package and hefted it. "It's heavy," he observed. "What's in it?"

"That," said Gulliver, squinting one eye menacingly, "is none o' yo' business! Just weigh 'er up an' send 'er out. An' mind yo' send 'er by the fastest possible way."

Joe placed the package on the scales. "Sure is heavy," he muttered. "It'll cost considerable to send this first class, an' even more if it goes the fastest way. Namely, by air mail out o' Lubbock."

Joe computed the charges by air to New York City, and counted out the necessary stamps. "Have to give you the stamps in three-centers," he explained. "They're the biggest ones I carry. Don't have much call for high-priced stamps."

Tom paid the postage, licked the stamps and stuck them to the package. "How soon," he asked, "will the package leave?"

Joe glanced at the clock as he placed the bundle in the outgoing mail sack and said, "Eleven-thirty now. The train is due at noon. If it's on time, your package will be on 'er way in thirty minutes."

Tom nodded. "Good."

"May as well tie out the mail." Joe tightened the drawstring at the top of the sack and continued, "You wouldn't be goin' past the station by any chance?"

"You want us to take the mail sack?" asked Tom.

"It'd save me the walk."

"We'll be glad to do it for you."

Gulliver had sauntered to the opposite side of the store. He came back carrying a bottle of soft drink. "What's that yo' said, Tom? Yo'd be glad to do what for this old coot?"

"I told him we'd take the mail sack to the station."

Gulliver extended the bottle. "Here, Tom," he said. "Yo' mouth must be downright dry after lickin' all them stamps. Here's some fizzle water to sluice yo' esophagus." To the storekeeper he said, "Yo' can put it on my charge account, an' bein' as we're goin' to the railroad station, yo'd better give me a sack o' gumdrops. Zeb Oliphant likes 'em."

Tom Quest grinned at the recollection of little old Zeb Oliphant. He had not seen the peppery station master since the time he had come to Bliss en route to a mysterious ghost town. The strange adventures in the ghost town, as related in "Sign of the Spiral," had sealed his friendship with the New York columnist, Whiz Walton. The amazing events that took place in the deserted town had led to a hair-raising expedition into the darkest corners of Ecuador. There, Tom, Gulliver, and Whiz Walton had found Tom Quest's father—a prisoner of the headhunters.

Hamilton Quest, one of the nation's foremost scientists and explorers, had disappeared on one of his expeditions. Missing for ten years, he had been given up for dead until rescued by his trusted friend Gulliver, and Tom. The details of their exciting trip to Ecuador and Peru are chronicled in "The Telltale Scar." The story of Hamilton Quest's return to the United States after a ten-year absence, and how he and Tom and their companions found high adventure among the Seminole Indians in

Florida's Everglades is told in "The Clue of the Cypress Stump."

Thinking of Zeb Oliphant, Tom said, "Does he still prefer the green gumdrops?"

"Yep," replied Joe. He transferred the sugar-coated candies from the scale to a paper bag and handed it to Gulliver.

Gulliver tossed the bag to Tom and said, "Yo' carry the gumdrops an' I'll take the mail sack to the jeep."

A moment later the big man squeezed behind the steering wheel, stepped on the starter, and they took off with a rocketlike roar. Gulliver had barely shifted into high gear when it was time to apply the brakes. He bore down hard. There was a screech of skidding tires and a smell of burning rubber as the jeep halted at the station platform. Gulliver turned off the ignition, then lifted his voice in a bellow that for sheer volume outdid the roar of his jeep's wide-open motor. "Yo', Zebediah! Where yo' at?"

Neither Tom nor Gulliver had the faintest suspicion that uninvited guests were at that very moment committing robbery at Gulliver's ranch house. Or that the articles stolen were to become the object of nationwide publicity because they represented part of the loot of one of the most amazing crimes in the history of the nation.

CHAPTER 2

The Mysterious Lights

A HIGH-PITCHED VOICE issued from somewhere inside the station. "You howlin' tornado! Lay off that caterwaulin'!"

"Come out here, yo' skinny galoot. I got official business."

Zeb Oliphant appeared at the open door. Fully dressed he would weigh scarcely a hundred pounds. His leathery face wore a stubble of white beard. He was scowling darkly. "Just when I'm up to my ears in trouble," he shrilled, "you got to come an' make life even more unbearable! Go somewhere else an' spread your loop, Gulliver. Take that gosh-danged infernal machine away from my station!"

"What's got yo' bristles up? I declare, Zeb, yo're gittin' more downright disagreeable all the time—an' skinnier, too. Why dad-rat it, yo've got so lean yo'd have to stand up twice to cast a shadow."

A stranger would conclude from the conversation that Gulliver and Zeb were deadly enemies, but Tom knew that actually they were very good friends.

Zeb clenched his fists and came to the edge of the platform. "Skinny, am I!" he said. "Well, lemme tell you somethin'—"

"I said skinny," cut in Gulliver. "And by thunderation if yo' closed one eye yo'd look like a needle."

"Come up here!" challenged Zeb. "I won't hit a man who's sittin' down, but you come up here an' I'll close an eye—your eye!"

"Yo' hear that, Tom?" Gulliver said, with a wink for his young friend. "The old goat aims to demolish me."

"What d'you want anyway?" the station master demanded.

"I told yo', Zeb. I'm here on official business. I'm deliverin' the U. S. mail."

"You're what!"

Gulliver reached behind the seat with one hand and picked up the canvas mail sack. He handled it with ease that belied its weight of more than fifty pounds. Holding it so Zeb could see the stencilled lettering, he said, "The U. S. mail. I fetched it from the post office."

"That does it!" Zeb stamped his foot and smacked his fist into the other palm emphatically. "That," he repeated, "does it! I've been votin' a straight ticket since I was twenty-one, an' if the administration trusts the likes o' you to move the mail, we're sure as shootin' headed for the rocks. Come next Election Day I'm changin' parties!"

Gulliver swung the mail sack overhead in the fashion

of a lariat, then let it go toward Zeb. "Catch!" he shouted.

The station master narrowly dodged the heavy sack which thudded to the platform. His rage broke all previous bounds. "It's sabotage!" he screamed, jumping up and down on the platform. "You're workin' ag'in the Government! You're mistreatin' the U. S. mail!"

"Let's git out," Gulliver said to Tom while the old man fumed and ranted. "Gimme the sack o' gumdrops."

Tom passed the candy to his friend, then stepped from the jeep to the station platform. Gulliver followed.

"I'm a man," Zeb said, "who'll run his boot heels over side-steppin' trouble. I don't hanker to do harm to no man. But I won't stand by an' see the U. S. mail mishandled! Not by a jugful! It's a lucky day for you, Gulliver, I'm not packin' hardware. If I had a gun I'd use the bar'l to part your hair. Then I'd unravel ca'tridges until —" The speech ended in a muffled, inarticulate sound as Gulliver pushed an oversize gumdrop into Zebediah's mouth.

"Yo', Zebediah," Gulliver said in a calm voice, "yo' better cool off. I declare yo' git hotter'n Election Day in a hornet's nest—an' for nothin' at all."

Zeb had managed to expel the gumdrop into the palm of his hand. He looked at the emerald-green morsel, muttered, "Gumdrops," and popped it back into his mouth.

"Here's some more," said Gulliver.

Zeb took the sack without thanks and stuffed it into his pocket. "This ain't a bribe, is it?" he demanded.

Gulliver shook his head, grinning.

Zeb turned to Tom and for the first time spoke in a normal voice. "Glad to see you again, Tom," he said, sticking out one hand.

Tom gripped the thin, hard hand. "I'm glad to see you, too, Zeb," he said.

"I heard you were visitin' at Gulliver's place. How long do you aim to stay?"

"Unless Dad needs me back in New York for something, I'll stay until school opens. How is your wife?" asked Tom.

Zeb winced, as if mention of his wife brought to mind an unpleasant incident in the recent past. "She's been on the warpath," he said, "ever since I bought a television outfit."

"Yo' got one o' them things?" queried Gulliver.

Zeb nodded and pointed to the roof of his house on the opposite side of the railroad tracks. The antenna, supported by the roof, was of efficient design.

"Doesn't your wife like television?" Tom inquired.

"She'd like it all right, if the darned thing worked, but the way it's been goin', she howls somethin' frightful every time it's turned on."

"What's the matter with it?" asked Tom.

"I don't know. It works fine late at night when there's nothin' worth while to look at. But durin' the daytime an' early evenin', it's all frazzled like fireworks goin' off. I can't stand no more o' my wife's horn-tossin' moods, so I'm sendin' it back to the company."

"Tom has lots o' savvy when it comes to gadgets like that," put in Gulliver. "Maybe he can look at yo' outfit an' tell yo' what's wrong."

"Would you?" asked Zeb.

Tom said, "Glad to, but I can't promise to be of any help."

"It's right here in the station. I brought it over this mornin', aimin' to pack it up an' send it back."

"Let's plug it in and try it. Even though there's no antenna we may be able to get a line on what's wrong."

Zeb led the way to his small office at one end of the station. The television receiver was a late model. The screen was dark until the set grew warm. Then a white glow spread over the surface. An instant later the entire screen was filled with streaks of dazzling white light that looked like tiny meteors—millions of them leaping through space.

Tom turned the various dials. The intensity of the light changed, but the streaks were everpresent.

Zeb said, "When the antenna is hooked in I get a picture, but those fireworks keep up until late at night. Then they're gone."

Tom turned up the sound control. The loudspeaker gave forth a heavy crackling and a high-pitched hum. Tom recognized the trouble as some kind of electrical interference. "Does anyone else in town have this trouble?" he asked.

"I'm the only one in town who has a television," replied Zeb proudly.

Tom said, "It looks to me as if someone near by is using high-frequency current, such as an X-ray machine."

Zeb shook his head.

"No? Well, the disturbance might come from a big electrical generator," Tom said.

"I don't know of one close by," said Zeb. "Electricity for the town comes from Lubbock. If the disturbance

was caused by the machines that make electricity, the people in Lubbock would have the same trouble I do. Which ain't the case."

"Before you send your receiver back, Zeb, I'd like to try it somewhere else. Would you be willing to let us take it back to Gulliver's ranch?"

To this Zebediah agreed.

Gulliver carried the heavy receiver to the jeep.

CHAPTER 3

Calling New York

THE TELEVISION RECEIVER was carefully wrapped and padded with old burlap sacks in the rear of the jeep. Tom Quest found room to sit beside it so he might hold it steady on the jouncing trip to Gulliver's ranch. Gulliver started the engine and stepped on the gas until it roared.

Tom braced himself for the take-off. He expected the jeep to leap forward, whip into a sharp curve, and bounce over the curb of a road too narrow for a complete U turn. But Gulliver, as a driver, proved unpredictable. He let the motor slow to idling speed, then eased the jeep ahead. He turned slowly, braked, then backed away from the curb. Starting forward again, he straightened out on the highway and proceeded at fifteen miles per hour.

For all his mighty strength, his rough exterior, his utter disregard for conventions, and his swashbuckling flamboyance, Gulliver could at times be considerate and gentle. Tom Quest had seen examples of this during previous adventures when the giant had been called on to treat wounds and attend the sick. Here was another ex-

ample of Gulliver's consideration. He knew that the television receiver represented a big investment for the little station master, and he drove carefully to minimize the risk of damage to the delicate instrument.

There was, however, a limit to Gulliver's concession. Though he would drive slowly and cautiously, he was firm in his refusal to follow the highway which, by reason of its turns, made the homeward trip two miles farther than the cross-country straight-line route. At the first turn of the highway, Gulliver continued straight.

The jeep had gone about one mile across the open plain when Tom Quest heard the whistle of the noonday train. "It's right on time," he said to Gulliver as he glanced at his wrist watch.

Gulliver nodded. "A couple o' minutes more," he said, "an' them there rocks will be headin' north. I wonder what yo' dad will have to say about 'em."

It was a quarter after twelve—time for the postmaster to make his daily trip to the station to pick up the mail. Reaching beneath the counter, Joe brought out a card that said, "GONE FOR MAIL. BACK IN 5 MINUTES."

Just then a heavy truck with canvas sides halted in front of the store. Through the window Joe observed that both men in the cab were strangers. The driver wore a battered hat and overalls, but the man who stepped down from the truck and entered the store was faultlessly dressed in a dark double-breasted suit, a white shirt and a neat bow tie. He had a swarthy complexion and black eyes. There were hard lines about his thin-lipped mouth. He glanced quickly about the store and then said, "I want information."

Joe nodded. "What d'you want to know, mister?"

"Has anyone been in here to mail a package?"

"Why?"

"I'm askin', see! I want a straight answer."

Joe had seen characters like this in movies. They always played the part of gangsters with short-barreled guns in shoulder holsters.

"Did a kid of seventeen or eighteen come here in a jeep," continued the stranger, "an' leave a package to be mailed?"

Joe nodded, "Y-y-yes, but what—"

"Where's the package?"

"G-g-gone. It's gone, mister. It went out on the train a few minutes ago."

"Where'd it go?"

"I—I don't rightly know," the postmaster answered evasively.

A hand shot across the counter like a striking snake. The stranger grabbed the front of Joe's shirt in a hard grip. "You'll remember if you know what's good for you!"

"L-l-let go," Joe faltered.

"Where'd that package go?"

"Somewhere in New York."

"What's the kid's name?"

"It's Tom. Tom Quest. Now see here, mister, I don't want no trouble."

"Who'd he send the package to?"

"His father, that's who. Let me go."

"What's his father's name?"

"H-H-Hamilton Quest an' he lives somewhere in New York. That's all I can tell you."

The newcomer tightened his grip. "The address!" he snapped. "You'd better remember it!"

The stranger pulled Joe forward until the counter pressed against his belly. Joe saw sudden death in the bloodshot black eyes, and the last of his resistance drained. "It—it's an apartment," he said thinly. "I—I think it's called the Gold Crest."

The stranger released Joe's shirt, grinned crookedly and muttered, "Thanks."

The storekeeper straightened his rumpled shirt. "D-don't mention it," he said.

"You got a telephone here?"

Joe motioned toward a booth in the rear of the store.

The stranger settled himself comfortably on the small seat inside the phone booth and held the receiver to his ear. He gave the long-distance operator the number of a small midtown hotel in New York City. While the circuits were being set up he drew a handful of change from his pocket and spilled it on a ledge beneath the phone. He spread out the coins and sorted them.

He could hear the buzzing of an unlisted telephone in New York. Three times it buzzed before a husky voice said, "Hello?"

The operator checked the number. The man in Bliss deposited the amount called for.

"Thank you. Go ahead," the operator said.

"Hello, Boss," said the man in the pin-striped suit. "You know who this is?"

"Zazzara?"

"Right."

"The operator said you were calling from Bliss. Where's that?"

"It's a one-horse town in Texas, Boss. It's the nearest phone to Thunder Mountain."

"What do you want, Zazzara?"

"Are you alone, Boss?"

"Yes."

"Had your phone checked to be sure there's no tap on it?"

"My line is not tapped," replied the New York man coldly. "But the phone company keeps a permanent record of long-distance calls. I told you not to use the phone except in case of an emergency."

"I figured this was an emergency."

"Has anything gone wrong?"

"No, Boss. Everything inside the mountain is going fine. But something happened, and I thought you should know about it."

"Talk."

"Yesterday one of the boys looked out of the cave and saw a kid ridin' up the side of the mountain. He stopped an' dismounted and looked at a lot of rock spread out on the ground." Zazzara paused, then finished with a significant spacing of his words. "It was extra special rock. You know what I mean?"

"What about the boy?" the Boss said coldly. "What did he do?"

"He picked up as much of the rock as he could load into his saddlebag and rode away. I had one of the men follow him to see where he went. He went to a ranch a few miles from the mountain. It's owned by a man named Gulliver."

"Did you get back the rocks?"

"No."

"Why not?" demanded the Boss impatiently.

"We tried to," Zazzara said. "Me an' Lasco went to the ranch today. We drove up to the house in the truck, an' when we didn't see anyone around we went inside. We found some of the rocks samples on the table. We took them, then a ranch hand came in. We told him we were pals of this fellow Gulliver, and got him talking. He said the boy's name was Tom Quest, and said he and Gulliver had packed up some of the rocks and brought them here to Bliss to send to the boy's father in New York. They're on the way right now, Boss. I got the name and address of the father, so you can maybe do somethin' about gettin' back the stuff. It won't do to let anyone learn what's in those rocks."

There was an angry mutter, then the other man said, "Give me the name and address."

"It's Hamilton Quest. He's at the Gold Crest Apartments."

"What's that?" the other man asked sharply.

"Gold Crest—"

"No, no! I mean the father's name."

"Hamilton Quest."

"That's what I thought you said. You bungling, stupid fools! You've put us in a fine spot! Of all the men in the world, those samples of rock have to be on the way to Hamilton Quest!"

Zazzara was bewildered. "What about him?" he asked.

"You've never heard of Hamilton Quest? No, of course you haven't. You never read scientific articles or magazines. It just happens that Hamilton Quest is one of the leading geologists. In case you don't know what that means, I'll tell you.

"It means rocks and minerals. It means that Quest will know at a glance what's been done to those rocks. It means that he'll be curious enough to investigate. It means he'll spike our whole game before we get started. It means we lose a five-million-dollar gamble. It means that some of us may get the electric chair!" During this emotional outburst the voice in the receiver had risen to a shrill peak. He finished with a scathing denunciation of Zazzara and the men who worked with him.

"Boss," Zazzara said meekly when the tirade ended, "Quest hasn't got the rocks yet. They just left here. If you keep an eye on him, you'll be able to get to the package before he can open it."

"I need no instructions from you, Zazzara. I'll attend to things at this end, and then I think I'd better join you and supervise the work at that end. I can't risk any more blunders."

Zazzara was sweating profusely when he came from the phone booth. He wiped his face with a fine linen handkerchief as he passed through the store and out the front door without a word or a glance at Joe.

There were no tracks on the hard, sun-baked ground, but Gulliver's sense of direction was unerring. Traveling at slow speed it was a long trip. But at last the low ranch house and the surrounding sheds were sighted.

Gulliver's top hand was a lean and lanky man named Wilson. Tex Wilson was steady and reliable. He managed the ranch efficiently when Gulliver was away, and was his right-hand man when the owner was at home. Tex was a clean-living man, proud of his physical condition. He was a crack shot and held a number of six-gun

championships. He smoked only moderately and avoided the use of liquor for fear of impairing his marksmanship.

It was, therefore, a great surprise to Gulliver and Tom when, after stopping the jeep near a small shed, they saw Tex round a corner of the house with a staggering gait and a stupefied expression on his face.

CHAPTER 4

The Missing Rocks

"Tex!" bellowed Gulliver, scrambling out of the jeep. "What in tarnation ails yo'?"

The foreman stood with feet wide apart. His eyes were staring and his face had a pallor instead of its usual ruddy glow. He swayed drunkenly, and would have fallen forward if Gulliver had not grabbed him around the shoulders.

Tom jumped from the jeep. "What's the matter, Tex?" he asked.

"Yo' been hittin' red-eye liquor?" Gulliver demanded.

Tex tried to speak. His lips moved, but the words were thick and indistinguishable. He shook his head slowly, then his legs buckled at the knees.

Gulliver picked the foreman up in his arms as if he were a baby. "We'd better git him inside the house."

Tom nodded and went ahead to open the door. Then, while Gulliver placed the unconscious man on a blanket-covered couch in the big living room, the boy hurried to the kitchen for a glass of water.

Momentarily alone with Tex, Gulliver bent close and sniffed. "No smell o' liquor," he observed. "Tex ain't been drinkin'. Must be somethin' else that's hit him."

He placed two of his huge fingers lightly on Tex's wrist and held them there while he looked at his massive watch. "Pulse is mighty slow," he announced as Tom entered the room half a minute later.

"Here's a glass of water," Tom said, "and a wet towel for his forehead. Maybe that'll help."

"Set the water on the floor, Tom, 'til he shows some sign o' comin' to. Yo' hold that towel on his forehead. I'll go git my medicine chest. It looks to me like Tex is goin' to need some special treatment."

Gulliver kept his medicine chest within reach at all times. It had been with him on every expedition and adventure. At home it rested at the foot of his bed. The heavy wooden chest was badly battered. It was about two feet square and reinforced with straps of iron. Early sailing vessels had always been equipped with chests like Gulliver's. They had been stocked with medicines and implements for the treatment of practically any ailment. Some of the containers in Gulliver's chest still held their original contents identified only by numbers. Gulliver had acquired the chest in the course of his travels, but he had never had the book of instructions that explained the usage of the pills and unguents.

Modern medicines, antiseptic lotions, bandages, gauze dressings, adhesive tape, and countless other items had been added to the chest. And it held more than first-aid and medical supplies. It contained everything Gulliver considered indispensable. Ammunition, oil, and cleaning fluid for his guns; grease for his boots; as well as extra

rawhide laces. It held spare parts for the jeep; an assortment of tools; a supply of nails, screws, nuts, and bolts. There was a leather kit containing thread and needles of various sizes for repairing clothing and camping gear. Another small kit held toilet articles and manicuring equipment. The odd assortment even included jars of special condiments, hot spices, herbs, and aromatic seeds that Gulliver favored in his cooking.

"He showed any sign o' comin' to?" asked Gulliver as he placed the chest on the floor beside the couch.

"No, Gulliver, he hasn't. His pulse is very low and his face feels cold. He seems to have been rapped on the head."

"Rapped on the head?" repeated Gulliver.

"Look here." Tom indicated a lump squarely on the top of Tex's head.

Gulliver grunted and leaned forward. He parted the hair carefully and examined the scalp. "Got a lump all right," he said. "The skin don't seem to be broken, but he could have a concussion from a bump like that—or maybe even a fractured skull.

"We'd better cover him up, an' keep him warm an' quiet 'til we can git the doctor. This here looks like somethin' too serious for us to handle. We might do the wrong thing. They's a doctor in Bliss, but none nearer."

"Where's the nearest telephone?"

"Ain't none this side o' Bliss. The boys are all workin' on the line fence two miles south o' here, so one of us will have to go fetch him."

"I'll go," Tom replied.

"I'll take the television set out o' the jeep so's there won't be nothin' to cramp yo' speed."

"Gulliver!" said Tom suddenly.

"Huh?"

"What's happened to the rocks?"

"What rocks?"

"The ones we didn't send to Dad. They were there on the table." Tom pointed. "Remember, when I packed the box, there was only room for half the rocks I brought from Thunder Mountain."

On a large oak table Gulliver saw the ball of string Tom Quest had used to tie his package, the scissors with which he had cut the string, and the fountain pen he had used to address the package. But the chunks of rock were gone. The big man rasped his fingernail across the stubble of beard on his cheek. "Downright curious," he muttered. "I remember seein' those rocks, Tom. They were there when we left the house."

"Tex may have moved them," Tom said. "Anyway, it doesn't matter. I'll go for the doctor."

CHAPTER 5

A Killer Waits

JOHN SASSOON lived in a small, moderately priced hotel in midtown New York. His ready-made clothes were conservative in style. He was a man of average size and there was nothing to set him apart except perhaps his voice, which was husky and unpleasant due to a chronic throat affliction.

Hotel personnel looked on Sassoon as a permanent guest and a highly desirable one who tipped generously and minded his own business. His source of income was unknown, but it was generally assumed that it came from investments because Sassoon apparently had no regular employment. In his suite he maintained a private telephone. He used this frequently, but visitors were few and far between. Sassoon looked and lived like a harmless, self-effacing individual. Actually, he was the heartless leader of a criminal gang whose operations were international in scope. Sassoon was a "Little Caesar," whose "Thumbs down!" had caused several cold-blooded murders. A number of hoodlums and killers called him

"The Boss." And it was Sassoon whom Zazzara had called "Boss" when he had telephoned from Bliss.

Sassoon had been shaken by Zazzara's news. The shipment of rocks to Hamilton Quest *must* be intercepted. He considered various devices by which he might secure possession of the package. With help, it would have been an easy matter simply to abduct Quest and leave someone in his apartment to watch for the mail. But there was no help at hand. Every one of Sassoon's underlings was engaged in Texas.

He called the post office and said he was expecting a package from Bliss, Texas. He told the postal clerk when the package had been mailed and learned that it would arrive in two days. He waited until noon of the second day, then called again. He said his name was Hamilton Quest; that he was expecting a package from Bliss, and asked if it had arrived. He waited while the records were examined. He intended to call at the post office in person for the package.

His plans went out the window when he was informed that the package had been sent by air from Texas, and had already been taken by special delivery to Quest's apartment.

Sassoon cradled the phone and swore. "Bungled again," he muttered. "Why didn't Zazzara tell me it was coming air mail! Now I've got to go in person and take that package away from Quest!"

He dropped a .38 revolver into one pocket and a bunch of master keys into the other. Then he put on a topcoat and a hat and left his hotel.

In the street he hailed a cab. He dismissed it in the

vicinity of Central Park and walked the remaining two blocks to the Gold Crest.

It was an old building—a relic of the days of high ceilings and big rooms. Though it had become outmoded, it retained all of its original respectability.

Sassoon studied the row of mailboxes in the vestibule until he found the name of Hamilton Quest. He noted with satisfaction that it was on the first floor. One of several master keys unlocked the lower door. Sassoon ascended the stairs silently and walked down a carpeted corridor to the door of Quest's apartment. He pressed his ear close to the door and listened. He tapped lightly on the door and waited. There was no response.

Sassoon studied the lock on the door with an expert eye, then selected a master key that moved the bolt. He drew his gun and held it ready while he opened the door.

The room was long and narrow. The windows, which were heavily draped in brocade, extended to within a few inches of the floor, and the floor was thickly carpeted. He stepped in quietly and closed the door. The room was typical of its era. It was richly furnished in plush and velvet. The only note of discord was the conglomeration of articles on a table near the front windows. Here Hamilton Quest must have been at work. Sassoon observed a microscope, a few glass-stoppered bottles holding chemicals, and the rocks from Texas. The cardboard carton that had held the rocks lay on the floor near by.

He put away his gun and loaded the rocks into the side pockets of his topcoat. His pockets bulged when he left the apartment. He walked the two blocks back to the park, and sauntered casually to the lake. In a se-

cluded spot he emptied his pockets, tossing the rocks one by one into the water. Then with a grim expression he returned to Hamilton Quest's apartment.

Meanwhile, those same Texas rocks were on Hamilton Quest's mind as he sat down to luncheon with Whiz Walton. The restaurant was a small one not far from the *Metropolitan Journal* building. Whiz Walton had gone there tingling with excitement after a telephone call from Hamilton Quest.

"Beat it," Whiz said to the waiter as he pushed back the silverware to make room to put his elbows on the table. "I'll call you when we're ready to order."

The waiter, accustomed to the whims of newspapermen, grinned and nodded. "Oke, Whiz," he said and withdrew.

"Aren't you hungry?" asked Hamilton Quest.

"Can't eat," replied the newshound, "when I'm excited. And right now I'm excited. I've got the old tingling in the spine that says a story's coming up."

"As a matter of fact, I do have something to tell you. But first let me ask whether your plans remain unchanged."

"I'm leaving tonight for Gulliver's ranch to spend a few days with Tom and the big guy, if that's what you mean."

"That," said Hamilton Quest, "answers my question. Your plans remain unchanged." He picked up the menu and studied it with something of a twinkle in his eye while he enjoyed the squirming impatience of the man across the table.

Lean and sophisticated, Whiz Walton was a bundle of nervous energy. He had been a top reporter for the *Met-*

ropolitan Journal long before he met Tom Quest and Gulliver. But the news beats he scored as a result of his adventures with these two had caused his fame to spread far beyond the circulation of his own paper. Leading wire services now carried his stories as front-page items. His daily column had become a syndicated feature. But more important than either fame or money to Whiz Walton was the privilege of working where and when he chose. His employer gave him a free hand to pick his assignments—and his vacations. He had chosen to spend a few days with his friends in Texas.

He lighted a cigarette and blew a smoke ring toward the ceiling in an effort to hide his impatience. He knew from experience that if Hamilton Quest had something to tell he would tell it in his own way. He could not be hurried by questions.

Finally Hamilton Quest lowered the menu. "This morning," he began slowly, "I received a package from Tom."

The newshound's nostrils quivered slightly, like those of a hunting dog on the scent of game. "What was in the package?"

"Rocks. There were exactly fourteen of them. The smallest was slightly larger than a walnut and the largest about the size of a duck's egg. There was a letter enclosed. In it Tom explained that he had found the rocks on a mountainside, and had noticed certain peculiarities about them. He sent them to me for examination."

"Did you examine them?"

Hamilton Quest nodded. "I completed a cursory examination before I telephoned you. Of course, I have not made a thorough analysis. I have no equipment in

my apartment for accurate weighing and measuring to do quantitative work. But Whiz, I can safely say that those rocks contain gold."

Whiz Walton tamped out his cigarette.

"There is, however," Quest continued, "one very peculiar aspect. You may or may not know that gold- and silver-bearing ore have certain definite characteristics which are well known to a geologist. The rocks about which I have been speaking have none of these characteristics."

"You mean," interrupted Whiz, "the gold is out of place? It's where it shouldn't be?"

Hamilton Quest nodded. "Not only that," he agreed, "it isn't even the right kind of gold."

"Holy mackerel!" exclaimed Whiz Walton. "How many kinds of gold are there? I always thought that gold was gold."

"You're wearing a ring, Whiz. It is made of gold."

The reporter glanced at his mother's wedding ring, which he wore on his smallest finger.

"With a grinding wheel I could reduce that ring to dust or to filings. With sufficient heat it could be reduced to a molten mass. With the proper chemicals it could be dissolved."

"What has that to do with Tom's rocks?"

"Have you," asked the scientist, "ever heard of 'salting'?"

"Oh, sure!" grinned the newshound. "That's a trick the old-timers used to use when they wanted to sell a phony gold mine. They'd pack gold dust into the barrel of a shotgun and fire it into the ground. Then they'd bring on the sucker and let him dig up a few shovelfuls

of the salted ground to be assayed. The assay would show a rich gold deposit. On the strength of that the swindlers would sell their worthless property."

"That is right."

"I get it! The fact that the gold was found in the wrong kind of rock makes you think someone had salted the place where the rocks were found."

"That is what I might have deduced, Whiz, except for one thing."

"What's that?"

"In the specimens I examined I found neither gold dust nor filings. The rocks appeared to have been impregnated with gold in a molten state. As a matter of fact, the rock itself had been subjected to tremendous heat. It was in an unnatural condition."

"I'd like to see that ore."

"I would be pleased to have you come to my apartment for dinner. I have no cook, but I think I can broil a steak that will satisfy you—at least until plane time."

"I'll be there," promised Whiz Walton. "I'll bring my bag and go direct from your place to the airport."

"Splendid," smiled Hamilton Quest. "By the time you arrive, I will have made a further examination of the rocks."

At that moment Sassoon used his master key to reenter the Quest apartment. He selected a comfortable chair in a far corner and sat down with his gun in hand to wait for the scientist.

CHAPTER 6

Dire Threats

HAMILTON QUEST closed the door and removed his hat and coat before he noticed something missing from the table at the front end of the long room.

"The rocks," he murmured, hurrying forward. "I thought I had left them on the table. Wonder if I'm becoming absent-minded."

The microscope, the chemicals, everything else appeared to be just as the scientist had left them, but the rocks were gone.

"Quest."

The slender man turned quickly toward the husky voice. A man wearing a dark topcoat and a snap-brim hat stood in the center of the room. He held a short-barreled gun in one hand.

"Don't yell."

"I have no intention of yelling," replied Hamilton Quest indignantly. "Who are you, and what is the meaning of this intrusion?"

"I'm here to have an understanding with you."

"How did you get in?"

"Almost any key would fit the lock on your door."

The intruder advanced slowly while Hamilton Quest stood watching. A flush of anger crept over the scientist's thin face. "Are you here to commit robbery?" he asked.

"I've taken all I intend to take. The rocks, I mean."

"Where are they?"

"You'll never see 'em again, Quest. And if you're smart, you'll forget all about 'em."

"Why?" demanded the scientist.

Sassoon tapped the barrel of his gun significantly.

"Indeed!" said Quest disdainfully. "Do you think I am afraid of you? The report of that gun would be heard by every person in this building, and there are many of them. You would not have the slightest hope of escaping."

A thin and mirthless smile twisted Sassoon's lips. "You're right," he said. "You're right about me not having a chance to get away, but you're wrong if you think I'd shoot you. That wouldn't serve my purpose. It's your son who'd pay for your mistake."

"What do you know about my son?"

"I know he's visiting a man named Gulliver in Texas. Likewise I know he found those rocks on the side of a mountain. He stole them, see?"

"Stole them!" Quest repeated sharply. "I'll have you know my son is no thief! He—"

"Save your breath," cut in Sassoon. "I won't hold it against him. Let's say he didn't know he was intruding on private property. I'm willing to overlook it *this* time.

But if it happens again—or if you don't agree to a little proposition—" he waggled the gun by way of punctuation.

"Proposition?"

"You're going to write a letter to your son and tell him you examined the rocks and they're just worthless hunks of ordinary stone. Tell him you threw 'em out. Then you're going to forget all about 'em and hope that Tom does the same."

"Why?"

"The less you and Tom know about what's going on, the better off you'll both be. I'll let you in on this much. A lot of money and men are involved. Me, personally, I wouldn't hurt a fly, except in self-defense, but I can't say the same for the rest of the men. They'd kill anyone who got in their way—and if your son doesn't stay away from Thunder Mountain, he'll be getting in their way. Do I make myself clear?"

"I cannot tell Tom to stay away from Thunder Mountain without giving him a reason."

"Don't tell him anything like that. It would only make him more curious. Just write him like I said, then hope and pray he keeps away from trouble. Now sit down and write that letter. I'll see that it's mailed."

The scientist was torn by conflicting emotions. His pride was rubbed raw by the arrogant domination of the husky-voiced man. Self-respect dictated that he should reject the order to write a letter to Tom, and his duty as a citizen called for resistance to the threats of one who was obviously engaged in some sort of illegal enterprise. Hamilton Quest was proud and self-respecting, but he was also a father. Above all else, the safety of his son was

his chief consideration. He felt debased and humiliated, but he sat down at his glass-topped desk and wrote the letter to Tom.

Sassoon leaned on the side of the desk and read as the scientist wrote. "That's fine," he approved, when the letter was finished. "Now address an envelope and hand it here."

He picked up the letter, held it to the light to make sure the ink was dry, then folded it carefully. "That's all I want from you," he said, taking the addressed envelope. "You just forget all about those rocks, and maybe no one will have to get hurt."

Quest turned in his chair and watched with his face set in grim lines as the stranger backed to the door, then left the room. He remained in the desk chair for some time after Sassoon had left, fighting to control the seething rage that sent hot blood to his flushed face. When his rage had subsided, he rose and opened a window as if to rid the atmosphere of a lingering contamination. He took out his handerchief to wipe the glass desk top where it had been smeared.

Then he changed his mind.

Where the gunman had rested his fingers while he watched the writing of the letter, there was a splendid set of fingerprints. Instead of wiping them away, Quest decided to preserve them. In the chest that held the compound microscope there was a bottle of clear liquid used for preserving specimens on glass slides. It served equally well for preserving fingerprints.

With the deft hands of a scientist, the outraged man coated the fingerprints with the varnish-like fluid, then used a diamond-tipped instrument to cut from the desk

top the six-inch square that supported the smears. He put it into one drawer of his desk, then shattered the rest of the desk top with a poker from the fireplace and swept the pieces into a wastebasket.

Quest's letter left New York that night by plane. By strange coincidence, Whiz Walton was among the passengers on that same plane.

CHAPTER 7

Reunion in Texas

THE BIG AIRLINER gathered speed and rose from the runway. Whiz Walton watched the twinkling city lights while the plane circled for altitude and leveled off on the course. Then he unhooked his safety belt and leaned back in the seat to think.

Dinner with Hamilton Quest had left the columnist baffled and bewildered. Never had he seen a man so changed in a few hours. At luncheon the scientist had been undeniably interested in his discovery of gold in the rocks Tom Quest had sent from Texas. Certainly he had planned a further examination and had promised the reporter more details when the two met for dinner in the Quest apartment. But when Whiz Walton had arrived at dinnertime he found the older man tense, nervous, and ill at ease. Quest's hand, usually as steady as that of a skillful surgeon performing a delicate operation, had trembled when he raised his glass. Moreover, he had studiously avoided all mention of the rocks. During the meal he had talked constantly, barely touching the food

on his plate. He had talked about the weather, politics, foreign affairs, and countless other subjects. He had rambled from one thing to another.

Finally, after dinner, Whiz cut sharply into the middle of a pointless anecdote to ask about the rocks.

Quest left his anecdote suspended and dropped his eyes as if to avoid the columnist's gaze. "Whiz," he began slowly, measuring every word, "I want you to forget those rocks. Forget everything I said about them. Forget I received them. It is most humiliating for a scientist with my years of experience in geologic examination to make such a stupid mistake. When I saw what appeared to be gold, I made a routine chemical test, and saw the reaction that indicates gold. Later, when I made further tests, I discovered that I had used the wrong bottle of testing acid. The rocks were quite commonplace and utterly worthless."

"Mr. Quest," Whiz Walton replied, "that's a very smooth story, but I don't believe it. It sounds like something you've rehearsed."

"You have a right to your opinion, Whiz."

"Where are the rocks?"

"They are gone. I did not want them around to remind me of my stupidity."

"Stupidity, my eye! What did you learn about them that made you decide to drop the investigation?"

"Whiz, I do not care to discuss the subject. Please accept what I have told you without further question or comment."

"But confound it, Mr. Quest, you and I both know your story won't hold water. You can trust me. Give me

the true facts. Something must have happened this afternoon. Something that made you dispose of the rocks and—"

"Please!" Hamilton Quest cut in with a note of supplication that the columnist could not ignore.

"Are you going to tell Tom that the rocks are worthless?"

"I have already written Tom a letter to that effect. If he asks you about the specimens he sent, you might tell him I threw them away."

Whiz shrugged his shoulders and muttered, "Okay, if that's the way you want it."

The rocks were not mentioned again until Whiz Walton was about to leave for the airport. Then, as Quest was shaking hands, he said, "Don't let Tom gather any more of those rocks."

As he left the Gold Crest, Whiz Walton's mental machinery was whirring at top speed, and his imagination was working overtime. He considered countless situations that might have come up to account for the scientist's strange behavior, and rejected every one because of faulty logic.

The cabin was dark and the flight was smooth. The steady droning of the motors lulled the newshound into slumber. He was roused by the stewardess when the plane was slanting to land at the field where he must change to another airline.

The second leg of the journey brought him to a small airport in Texas. An ancient taxicab with only one headlight carried him to the railroad station in time to board the morning train. It was a slow train. It stopped at ev-

ery town and hamlet. The sun beat through the windows despite their film of dirt and made the coach intolerably hot. The plush-covered seats were hard and dusty. Whiz felt grimy. He was hungry. He was tired and nervous. He squirmed restlessly and smoked countless cigarettes during the six hours it took to cover the one hundred miles to Bliss.

At last he stepped from the coach and inhaled the clear fresh air. He heard two shouts of welcome. When he saw Tom and Gulliver clambering out of the jeep his drooping spirits were revived.

Tom was the first to shake hands. "Gosh, Whiz," he said, "it's great to see you! I'll take your bag."

Then Gulliver shook hands. "Yo' look peaked, Whiz," the big man said. "Yo' been losin' weight from too much night life an' wrong eatin'. But don't yo' worry about it. We'll put some paddin' on yo' ribs. Climb into my jeep, an' we'll have yo' at the ranch in jig time. We got one stop to make an' then we'll go smokin' across the plain."

"How's that heap running?" Whiz asked as he eyed the impudent-looking jeep somewhat apprehensively.

"First rate," Gulliver said. He lifted two bulky paper-wrapped packages off the rear seat. "Yo' git in an' set. Then I'll find a place for these."

The reporter settled himself in the center of the low seat and stuck his long, thin legs out straight with his feet between the two front seats. Tom placed the suitcase on one side of Whiz's legs.

Gulliver leaned over with the larger of the two bundles. "Yo' squeeze yo' legs against the suitcase an' there'll be room on this side for the laundry." He grunted as he wedged in the bundle. "Yo'll be some crowded, but not

for long. We're unloadin' these packages before we leave town."

"You delivering laundry now?" asked the columnist innocently.

"This here is for Tex Wilson. He's my top hand. We're leavin' his clean clothes at the doc's house."

"Why there?"

"Because that's where Tex is at."

"Sick?"

"Not just sick. He got bopped on the spire."

"He got *what*?"

Tom Quest explained. "Someone came to the house a few days back and knocked him out. When he regained consciousness he couldn't remember anything that had happened. The doctor thought it would be better if he had Tex in his home where he could keep a close watch on his condition."

Gulliver handed the smaller but heavier package to Whiz. "This," he said, "is some o' my special wild turkey stew made up with plenty o' seasonin', an' spices to give 'er authority. I figure Tex is likely to git pulin' grub at the doc's house. He'll need some o' my brand o' cookin' to keep up his strength."

Whiz felt his very tongue and taste buds curling from the mere recollection of a mouth-searing experience with the type of seasoning that Gulliver preferred. All other flavors were dominated by a type of Mexican pepper, which, when dried and ground to powder, was hot beyond imagination.

"Hold that careful," warned Gulliver as he squeezed into the driver's seat. "Handle it easy, so's it don't slosh around too much."

Reflecting that the stew might well have something in common with nitroglycerin, Whiz said, "Is it likely to explode?"

Gulliver turned and eyed the other resentfully. "It won't explode," he retorted. "But the top o' the bucket don't fit very tight. If some o' my stew sloshes out, it's likely to eat holes through yo' clothes."

He stepped on the starter and the gas at the same time. The engine burst into action with a roar to drown any reply Whiz might have made.

Gulliver drove only a short distance before jamming on the brakes. He kept the motor idling while Tom unloaded the bundles and carried them to the front door of a square two-story house.

Tom talked briefly to the doctor's wife, who opened the door and accepted the stew and laundry.

"Did yo'," asked Gulliver when Tom resumed his seat, "tell Doc's wife how to handle that turkey stew?"

"Gently and with asbestos gloves," put in Whiz Walton drily.

Tom chuckled but Gulliver ignored the columnist.

"Did yo' tell her to heat it an' dish it up without lettin' it boil or simmer?"

"Yes, Gulliver."

Gulliver nodded approval. "Good. I'd hate to have my cookin' spoiled by mishandlin'." He gripped the gearshift lever to start, then changed his mind. "Did she say how Tex is gettin' on?"

"There's no change in his condition. He slept well last night and he's feeling all right, but he still has a gap in his memory."

"How large a gap?" asked Whiz.

"He remembers that Gulliver and I left the ranch to go to town. Then he remembers looking up from the couch in the living room and seeing us at his side."

"He was unconscious part o' that time," Gulliver said.

"But he was conscious from the time we left until he was slugged. It might have been a couple of hours. That's the part he can't remember."

Gulliver grumbled, "Doggone it. If only he could recollect who came to the ranch, we'd have a line on the critter that creased his noggin."

"And," added Tom, "the man who stole my rocks."

"Rocks?" repeated Whiz quickly. "What rocks are you talking about?"

"Aw, they was just some hunks o' stuff Tom picked up on the side o' Thunder Mountain."

Whiz tried to appear casual. "Were they valuable?"

"We don't know," Tom said. "I sent a box of the rocks to Dad. The rest were left on a table in the house. They were gone when we returned from town."

"Oh," said Whiz. "That's the stuff you sent your father."

"Let's git gittin'."

"Wait, Gulliver. Hold it for a second. I think I can tell Tom something about the specimens."

"You can?" asked Tom eagerly.

"Your father mentioned them."

"What did he say about them?"

"He said the rocks were worthless. He said they were very commonplace."

Gulliver half turned and eyed the newshound. "Quest said that?"

"Yes."

"Humph."

"You needn't snort like that. What I said will be confirmed in a letter from Tom's father."

"Mebbe he's right about them hunks o' stuff bein' worthless, but by gobs he can't call 'em *commonplace!* Not by a jugful! Mebbe I ain't a geologist, but I sure have seen aplenty o' different kinds o' rocks an' ore. An' I never seen nothin' resemblin' that stuff that Tom brought down from Thunder Mountain. An' what's more," Gulliver finished emphatically, "the stuff must o' meant somethin' to someone or it wouldn't o' been stole!"

"It's no great loss," Tom said. "I can go back to Thunder Mountain and get more."

Whiz Walton sagged as the jeep moved forward. A responsibility had suddenly settled heavily on his shoulders. Quest's final words in reference to Tom had been a plea: "Don't let Tom gather any more of those rocks."

Why? Whiz Walton asked himself. *Why? Why? Why?*

CHAPTER 8

Peril Unknown

THE JEEP bounced across the hard, uneven surface of the plain between Bliss and Gulliver's ranch. No one could speak above the engine noise, so Whiz Walton, alone in the back seat, had an opportunity to think about Tom Quest and the rocks on Thunder Mountain.

The theft of the rocks from Gulliver's ranch house, and Tom's statement that he could find replacements on the mountainside were serious developments in view of what Hamilton Quest had said. Gulliver's disagreement with Quest's opinion that the rocks were commonplace would only add to the boy's eagerness to get more samples for his rock collection.

Hamilton Quest had asked Whiz to prevent Tom's return to Thunder Mountain. Something in Quest's manner had given the columnist a feeling of real peril. Some sinister force seemed poised, ready to strike with devastating power. The same threat apparently haunted Hamilton Quest to such a degree that he dared give no details. Whiz wondered what he might say to Tom.

Surely the boy would want to know the reason if he were asked to stay away from Thunder Mountain. What was the reason? Whiz Walton didn't know and couldn't guess.

"I'll have to cook up something," he told himself. "Or maybe I can think of something that will keep Tom too busy to go after more of those confounded rocks. That's the only solution I can think of."

It was two o'clock in the afternoon when they reached the ranch house.

"It's too late for dinner," Gulliver said as he climbed from the jeep.

Whiz Walton was hungry. "I haven't eaten since last night," he said plaintively.

"I'll fix yo' somethin' fancy by way o' supper."

"What time is supper?"

"Half-past six or seven o'clock." Gulliver grinned at Whiz's woebegone expression. "I reckon me an' Tom could do with a bite," he said. "We ain't et since breakfast. I'll go spread some grub on the kitchen table for a snack while Tom shows yo' where yo'll sleep."

Tom lifted the newshound's suitcase from the car and said, "Come on, Whiz. Follow me."

Whiz Walton was surprised when he saw the neat interior of Gulliver's home. The living room with its paneled walls was large and tastefully furnished. Built-in shelves held a fine assortment of books. The decorations consisted of well-chosen pictures and Indian pottery.

Gulliver enjoyed the other's surprise.

"You've done all right for yourself, Gulliver," commented Whiz.

"Aw," the big man said, "I don't hanker for all these

fancy fixin's. All I need is a blanket roll, a couple o' stones to make a cookin' fireplace, an' a supply o' vittles. I fixed this here place so's it'd be comfortable for Mr. Quest an' Tom when they visit me. Now yo' git settled in yo' bedroom while I rustle up some grub."

The walls of Whiz's bedroom were of pine which had been oiled and rubbed to a satiny finish. Chests of drawers had been built into the walls. Whiz Walton sat down on the bed, which was covered by a Navajo Indian blanket. He bounced a few times on the innerspring mattress and grinned delightedly at Tom.

"This," he said, "is all right!"

Tom laughed. "You're due for another surprise," he said. "Look here."

He opened a door to reveal a white-tiled bathroom adjoining the sleeping quarters. There were gleaming fixtures for both hot and cold water, and a stall shower in addition to the tub.

"Say-y-y!" exclaimed Whiz. "This would do credit to a Park Avenue penthouse. I thought we'd be hauling water in buckets and washing from a tin basin on the back porch. Is there really running water?"

"Yes. And it's been tested for purity. It's pumped from a spring."

"Hot water?"

Tom nodded. "Heated by electricity."

"Oh boy! Let me at it!"

Whiz sailed his hat to the bed and followed it with coat, necktie, shirt, and undershirt. Stripped to the waist, he turned on the gushing stream in a washbowl and went to work to rid himself of travel dirt while Tom stood at the door and watched.

"Where does the electricity come from?" Whiz asked as he reached for a big and billowy towel.

"The power plant is in one of the buildings behind the house. A gas engine runs the generator."

"To think Gulliver had a place like this and never told me about it. That great big overgrown baboon beats anything I ever saw. I never would have expected him to live in this kind of luxury."

"He doesn't," said Tom simply. "This is one of the guest rooms. He wouldn't sleep here."

"Where does he sleep?"

"There's a small room that looks as if it had been tacked onto one side of the house."

"I noticed that," said Whiz. "Is that his room?"

"That was his original cabin. He built it when he settled here. The house was added to it."

"And he still sleeps there?"

"That's right. He sleeps on the same old bunk and uses a battered old tin basin for washing."

"Why?" asked Whiz, taking a T-shirt from his handbag.

Tom smiled. "He claims he might go soft with easy living."

"Gulliver is as likely to go soft as a hunk of Vermont granite or a bolt of lightning!"

"Personally, Whiz, I think the big guy likes to keep things simple. He doesn't want much for himself. He has a sentimental attachment to his original home, humble as it is."

At that moment the subject of discussion bellowed, in a voice that shook the house, "Grub's on! Come an' git it!"

Whiz pulled on his shirt, ran a comb through his hair, and said, "I'm starved. Let's eat!"

Tom led the way to a big, sprawling kitchen.

"I just piled what was handy onto the table," Gulliver said, pointing to a heavily loaded slab table. "If what yo' want ain't there, what's there'll have to do 'til suppertime."

The table held cold roast beef, a large smoked ham, and a platter filled with slices of turkey breast. Huge slices of homemade bread were heaped on a plate beside a two-pound chunk of butter resting in a bowl of ice. Fresh strawberries had been given a snowy coat of powdered sugar, and there was a pitcher full of thick, rich cream to pour over them. A gallon pitcher was brimful of milk. Also there were cold beans, apple sauce, and an assortment of jams, jellies, and condiments of every description. At one side rested the largest apple pie that Whiz had ever seen.

The pie, Gulliver explained, had been left over from breakfast.

"Just a little snack!" murmured the reporter.

"I got some cold boiled potatoes," Gulliver suggested. "It won't take long to slice 'em up an' fry 'em if yo' want 'em."

"Never mind, Gulliver, there's enough here to take the raw edge off my appetite. I'll manage to get by somehow until suppertime."

Gulliver noted the reporter's good-natured sarcasm. Not to be outdone, he said, "This ain't workin' grub. I admit it'd never do if we expected to do some he-man work this afternoon, but it'll hold yo' if yo' just take it sort o' easy, an' don't do nothin' strenuous."

Tom and Whiz loaded their plates and sat down.

"Aren't you going to eat, Gulliver?" Tom asked.

Gulliver had been eyeing the table while he remained standing. "I done some nibblin' while I was layin' out the food. I reckon a sandwich would just about fill in the open spaces that's left in my stomach."

He covered a slice of bread with a thick layer of butter and added several large slabs of turkey meat and one thick slice of ham. Then, using a small key taken from his vest pocket, he unlocked a cupboard. Arranged on shelves were a number of jars similar to those in Gulliver's medicine chest. He selected one of the jars. The contents in appearance resembled chili sauce. Gulliver dumped a generous portion on his sandwich, then replaced the jar and locked the cabinet.

"I keep the hottest o' my things locked up ever since four years ago," he explained. "That was the time a new cook made the mistake o' usin' my private seasonin' in the bunkhouse chow."

"What happened?" asked Whiz Walton.

"Well," Gulliver covered his sandwich with another slice of bread, "when the boys bit into that there meal, they started yowlin' like a pack o' wild dogs that's fell into a deep well with a couple o' hornets' nests. Then they took off after the cook. That poor critter headed for the border, an' the last I heard, he was passin' through Panama with my boys still a-chasin' him."

After the meal, Tom Quest looked at his watch.

"What's on the schedule for this afternoon?" asked Whiz.

"We'll look the horses over and find one you like. Then we'll ride around the ranch so you and the horse

can get used to each other. Tomorrow we'll have a long ride. We'll start out early and I'll show you where I found the rocks on Thunder Mountain."

Whiz Walton felt a sudden misgiving. He, too, glanced at his watch. Between now and tomorrow morning, he must find some way to change Tom's plans.

CHAPTER 9

The Spiral Appears

Tom Quest and Whiz Walton reined up and dismounted beside the corral. A cowhand was there to meet them.

"I'll unsaddle the horses," he said.

"Thanks, Jim," replied Tom.

"Did you show Mr. Walton all over the spread?"

"Just about."

"Some layout!" exclaimed the columnist. "Gulliver certainly has a top-notch place."

"She'll do." Jim grinned. "I sure hope the two of you are fixed for eatin'."

"What do you mean?" asked Whiz.

"Gulliver is doin' something special by way of supper."

"What are we having?" asked Tom.

The cowboy shrugged his shoulders as he loosened the cinches. "I don't know, but it must be special. He's had Charlie Wind-Up helping him in the kitchen ever since you two started your tour of inspection."

"Charlie Wind-Up?" echoed Whiz. "Who's he?"

"An Injun," Jim said laconically.

"He likes to cook," explained Tom. "He's cookie for the bunkhouse crew. He works for Gulliver in exchange for cooking lessons."

Whiz Walton looked incredulous.

"I'm not kidding," Tom said. "He won't work for money. He has more than he can ever spend. He stays here only because when Gulliver fixes something special, he lets Charlie Wind-Up help."

"You say he's rich?"

"Got more'n all us waddies put together," grunted Jim as he pulled the saddle off one of the horses and slung it across the corral.

"Oil?"

"Clocks," replied the cowboy.

"Clocks!"

"You tell him, Tom."

"Come with me, Whiz. I want to visit the junk pile before we go to the house. On the way I'll tell you about Charlie Wind-Up." Turning to the cowboy, Tom asked, "Is that scrap heap still behind the barn?"

Jim nodded.

"What do you want from the scrap heap, Tom?" asked Whiz.

"Some iron rods and hunks of pipe. I'm going to rig a television antenna."

"I'm curious about that Indian," said Whiz.

"Charlie Wind-Up?"

"Yeah. How did he make money with clocks?"

Tom chuckled. "A few years ago," he said, "Charlie decided to see the world. He went into Bliss and drew out his lifetime savings which amounted to about fifty dol-

lars. Then he went to the railroad station and bought a ticket to Chicago. While he was waiting for the train, he became acquainted with a traveling salesman. The salesman was stranded. He didn't have a nickel and he wanted to get to Chicago."

"I know the feeling," observed Whiz Walton dryly. "I suppose he talked the poor Indian out of his railroad ticket."

"Not exactly," Tom Quest said. "He had a suitcase full of cheap alarm clocks which he had been trying to peddle."

"He swapped the clocks for the ticket?"

"That's right."

"What did Charlie Wind-Up do with the clocks?"

"He gave them to Indians. The Indians, of course, were tickled with them. They were bright and shiny and they had alarms that would wake the dead."

"You say he *gave* them the clocks?"

"Charlie gave away the clocks but kept the keys. The Indians didn't care about telling time, but they liked to play with the alarms. Charlie went the rounds every week and charged for winding up the clocks. That's how he got his name—Charlie Wind-Up."

Whiz Walton whistled admiringly. "What a monopoly!" he murmured.

Behind an old barn there was a mountain of rusty scrap metal. Useless motors, gasoline engines, machine parts, bent fence posts, parts of cars, tractors, and farm machinery as well as lengths of pipe were piled in a disordered heap. Tom pawed through the hardware until he found a number of lengths of metal.

"Now," he said, "we'll take these to the shop, cut them to length and make an antenna."

In the well-equipped machine shop, it was a simple matter to cut and thread the metal, then fasten it together. In half an hour Tom held up a contrivance that roughly resembled an umbrella minus the cover and with many ribs missing.

"After supper," he said, "we'll mount this up on the roof and run a couple of leads into the living room. Then we can try Zeb Oliphant's television receiver."

"Is that the outfit I saw in the living room?"

Tom nodded and briefly outlined the difficulty Zeb had experienced in Bliss. "We brought the outfit here in Gulliver's jeep," he finished. "I'm going to tinker with it and see if I can find the trouble."

Without warning there came a raucous clanging from the direction of the house.

"Fire!" exclaimed Whiz Walton.

"No," laughed Tom. "That means we eat."

As the two emerged from the machine shop they saw a tall, lean Indian wearing a stiffly starched white jacket. With a hammer he was pounding on a heavy iron triangle that hung from a timber extending from the house.

"That," said Tom, "is Charlie Wind-Up."

"Ten minute," Charlie grinned. "Then supper."

"It'll take all of that," said Whiz, looking at his hands, "to get this rust off my hide."

Tom Quest hesitated at the door. "Charlie," he said, "you're grinning like a cat that's found the cream."

The Indian's wide mouth expanded farther. "Plenty surprises come quick."

"Nothing Gulliver does will surprise me," Whiz said. "I'm prepared for anything."

In this the columnist was badly mistaken.

When the door to the dining room was opened, both Whiz and Tom found it impossible to suppress gasps of sheer amazement. Here, in the tastefully furnished room, was evidence of a hitherto unrevealed facet of Gulliver's complicated personality. The table was spread with snowy linen. Crisp napkins of the finest quality rested beside each place. Candles burned in silver holders and their shimmering light was reflected by the most handsome sterling place settings Whiz Walton had ever seen, and by crystal glassware hand-cut in a tasteful pattern.

For a moment Whiz and Tom could only stand and gape in admiration, then the columnist found his voice. "There isn't a society hostess on Park Avenue," he said softly, "who could set a better-looking table!"

Gulliver, at the far end of the room, beamed his pleasure. "Yo' like it?" he said. "Take a closer look at that there silver."

Whiz picked up one of the table knives. Engraved on the handle he saw a familiar pattern. It was the spiral pattern that Tom's father had designed many, many years before.

"All these things," Gulliver said, gesturing toward the table, "used to belong to yo' mother, Tom."

"They—they did?"

"The silverware, the table linen, an' everythin' else. Yo' dad—travelin' around so much—didn't have no place to keep the things, so he asked me to take care o' them. They's a lot more besides what yo' see here. I figured this'd be as good a time as any to let yo' see the layout.

I'll turn the works over to yo' when yo've got a home o' yo' own."

"The dinner," observed Whiz Walton, "had better be mighty special."

"Yo'll see," Gulliver said simply. "What's more, yo'll eat it if I have to ram it down yo' throat!"

CHAPTER 10
Tom Experiments

WHIZ WALTON pushed his chair back from the table and sighed heavily. "I'm stuffed," he groaned.

Gulliver, at the head of the table, frowned darkly. "Yo' got any complaints about that there meal?"

"Only that it was *too* good," replied the newshound. "I don't want any more food for a week!"

The dinner had begun with rich wild-turkey broth, thick with tender morsels of white meat. After that, Charlie Wind-Up had brought in course after course of choice dishes, each one a masterpiece of the culinary art. The dessert had been prepared at the table. To call it strawberry shortcake would be like calling Napoleon a soldier.

There had been a dramatic lull before the dessert. Charlie had completely cleared the table. Then he brought in three large bowls and placed them conveniently within Gulliver's reach. Directly in front of the host, he placed a golden-brown biscuit as large as a medium-sized pie and fully two inches in height.

Using a large knife, Gulliver split the biscuit through the center and set the upper half aside. Steam rose and the air was filled with the fragrance of hot dough. With a large spatula, Gulliver dipped into a bowl of soft butter and spread it thickly over the biscuit. It melted and oozed down the sides while the big man piled on crushed and sugared strawberries. With the touch of a master chef, he fitted the top of the biscuit over the berries, then once more spread butter, and ladled on bright-red whole strawberries. The juice of the berries, thickened with sugar, ran down the sides of the cake and blended with the melted butter. On top of everything Gulliver piled thick whipped cream. Despite the prodigious meal that had gone before, not a speck of the shortcake remained.

"Golly," laughed Tom Quest, "I feel as though I weighed a ton. I wonder if the roof'll support me?"

"The roof?" queried Whiz.

"Yes. We must put up that television antenna."

"Oh no," moaned the reporter. "Not now. Can't that wait until later?"

"It'll be dark in half an hour," Tom pointed out.

"I mean, until tomorrow, or next day—or maybe the day after. It's likely to take at least two days for my stomach to get back to normal size. I could no more climb a ladder to the roof than I could fly."

"I can handle it alone, Whiz. It won't take long to rig it up."

Gulliver said, "What yo' talkin' about, Tom?"

"Zeb Oliphant's television receiver. Don't you remember, Gulliver? We promised to check it for him."

"Yo' got to fix one o' them things like Zeb has on his house?"

Tom nodded.

"Looks like that'll take some doin'."

"The antenna is all made. Whiz and I made it before supper. All I need is some lead-in wire."

"They's a lead-in from the radio antenna. Can't yo' use the same one?"

Tom shook his head. "For television the lead-in has to be different. There must be two strands of wire instead of one. I saw some wire hanging in the shop. If you don't mind, I'll use that."

"Help yo'self to anythin' yo' can find. Me, I'll help any way I can, but I don't know the first darned thing about these television gimcracks."

"It'll probably kill me to move," said Whiz, "but I'll lend a hand, as long as you don't expect me to do a rhumba on the roof."

The columnist helped Tom carry a ladder to the side of the house and slant it against the roof. He waited below while the boy scrambled up with his pockets full of tools, a coil of wire around his neck, and the antenna in one hand. It was dusk when he descended and brought the lead-in through a window to the living room. While Tom connected the ground wire and the antenna, and plugged the set into an electric outlet in the wall, Gulliver watched with interest.

Whiz had settled himself in a deep chair. He lighted a cigarette, leaned his head back, and stuck out his long, thin legs. As he smoked he reflected that it was just about twenty-four hours ago that he had left New York. The words of Hamilton Quest came from a recess of his brain. Whiz remembered the strained expression, the grim seriousness of Quest's face when he had said, "Don't let Tom gather any more of those rocks."

The newshound asked himself the ever-recurring questions. What was the secret of the rocks? Why should Tom be kept away from Thunder Mountain, where the rocks had been found? Why—and how?

Gulliver's conflicting appraisal of the rocks and the fact that some of the specimens had been taken from this very room made Whiz's assignment almost impossible. Tom planned to ride to Thunder Mountain in the morning. And so far his plans remained unchanged.

The television screen became alive with dancing streaks of light. Tom toyed with the controls and presently the picture appeared. It was recognizable as a movie featuring a cowboy hero twenty years older than he had been when the film was made. The upper and lower portions of the picture were clear, but a band of disturbance covering one-third of the screen's area all but obliterated the central portion of the scene. When Tom turned up the sound control, the lines of dialogue were indistinct in the background of a nerve-jangling crackle and a high-pitched hum.

"That," said Gulliver, "is just the same as it acted in the station."

Tom turned the control knobs on the front of the receiver and changed adjustments on the rear. He increased and decreased the contrast and the brilliancy of the picture on the screen, but nothing he did eliminated the disturbance.

"I can't understand it," he said finally. "I thought this disturbance came from some kind of electric generator in the town of Bliss."

"Mebbe it does," said Gulliver.

"If it were anything in Bliss, the disturbance would be lots greater there than it is here. But that's not the case."

Gulliver said, "When yo' tried it in the railroad station, there wasn't an antenna hooked up to the set."

"I'll disconnect the antenna."

With the lead-ins disconnected, the upper and lower portions of the screen became flecked with white spots. The broadcast picture was all but obliterated by what looked like a snowstorm, but the strange horizontal band referred to by Zeb as "fireworks," remained unaffected.

"Probably something wrong with the receiver," suggested Whiz Walton.

"I wonder," replied the boy. Then suddenly, "I have an idea!" He moved to the radio receiver. It was a large combination model designed to receive broadcasts on all wave bands. He turned on the radio, and while waiting for it to warm up, adjusted the controls to receive a short-wave band of the same frequency as that of the television receiver. Presently the speaker began to hum. Tom cut down the volume until the hum became inaudible, then turned the dial slowly, starting at one end of the wave band.

The crackling noise began softly and increased to deafening volume as the indicator moved toward a critical point. The speaker rattled and the whole room seemed to vibrate.

"Holy mackerel!" exclaimed Whiz Walton. "What've you tuned in?"

Tom had to shout to make himself heard above the nerve-jangling disturbance. "I wish I knew!" He advanced the dial farther in the same direction and the crackle faded. There was a click as he turned off the radio.

"That there noise," observed Gulliver, "sounded just

about the same way as it did on Zeb's television outfit."

Tom nodded. "That's right."

"What do yo' make of it, Tom?"

"It seems to prove that the trouble isn't in the television receiver."

"What makes that noise?"

"Some sort of electrical disturbance."

"Static electricity in the air?" suggested Whiz.

"If it were static, it would be all over the dial. Whatever the disturbance is, it has a definite wave length. It can be tuned in and out, just like a radio station."

"How about Gulliver's electric plant? He has an outfit that generates enough electricity to run a town. Wouldn't that kick up a disturbance?"

"It did," said Gulliver. "It made a rip-snortin' disturbance until I got some gadgets hooked up to correct it. Since then, I've had no trouble."

"Maybe the gadgets have gone haywire."

"The disturbance," put in Tom, "doesn't come from anything on the ranch."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. I'm sure because we got the same disturbance when we operated the television set in Bliss."

"That's so. I forgot about that. By the same token, the disturbance couldn't be from anything in Bliss, because you have it here."

"And it's just as strong here as in Bliss."

"Does that mean that the source of the trouble is about the same distance from Bliss as it is from here?"

"I'd say so, Whiz."

"What can Zeb Oliphant do about it?" asked Gulliver. "I'd like to see the pore old coot git his money's worth

out o' that television he bought. Yo' got any suggestions, Tom?"

"The source of the disturbance could be located with a direction finder."

"Humph!" snorted Gulliver. "He wouldn't know what yo' were talkin' about when yo' git into technical stuff like direction finders. He wouldn't know a direction finder from a divinin' rod. He wouldn't know where at to git one, or how to use it if he got it!"

"I didn't mean that Zeb should do it himself. I thought he might call in a radio expert."

Gulliver looked levelly at the boy and said, "Tom, ain't yo' forgittin' where yo're at?"

"I'm on your ranch, Gulliver. Why?"

"This here is cow country, an' they ain't no near-by places any bigger'n Bliss. In these parts, when a man wants somethin' done, he does it himself. If he don't know how, he learns! A man around here is on his own. He wants electricity in his house, he's got to be an electrician to keep the outfit runnin'. He buys gas-powered machines, he learns darn soon to make repairs, or he don't use that same. He wants inside plumbin', he learns to be a plumber—or, by gobs, he just has to put up with dippin' water from the well, an' bathin' in the creek."

"He wants to eat," cut in Whiz Walton, "he learns to cook."

"Yo' can say that again! Now, Tom, yo' just forgit such darn fool notions as callin' in a radio expert. They just ain't anyone o' that breed around here. I reckon yo' know as much or more about radio as any man this side o' Lubbock."

"Is it complicated?" asked Whiz.

"What?"

"A direction finder."

"Not very."

"Would you know how to use one, Tom?"

"There's not much to it." Tom became thoughtful. "In fact," he said, "I think we could rig up a crude outfit with my portable radio."

Something exploded in Whiz Walton's brain.

It was more than an idea. It was a plan. Not just a suggestion of a plan that would require a lot of thoughtful consideration, but a fully grown plan complete and ready to use.

Until now, the columnist had been able to give only half his interest to Tom's experiments with the radio and television. The other half of his attention had been shrouded by blind groping for some way to divert the boy from his intention to visit Thunder Mountain and gather more of the forbidden rocks.

Without warning the solution to the problem exploded into full bloom like a glorious display of aerial fireworks. The solution was simple and clean-cut beyond belief. There must be a flaw in it somewhere, but during the few seconds that Whiz turned it over in his mind, he could find no flaw.

"Tom," he said, when he found his voice, "let's do it."

Tom looked at the reporter questioningly.

"Let's make a direction finder and locate the radio disturbance. I don't know much about those things, but I'll help all I can. We can start to work first thing in the morning."

Tom looked doubtful.

"I know you wanted to gather more of those rocks,"

Whiz went on quickly, "but that can wait. Here's a chance to do old Zeb a good turn. And who knows, we might run into something interesting when we locate the disturbance."

Whiz later realized that this had been a classic of understatement, topped only by his next remark: "I might find material for a story."

Tom grinned. "All right, Whiz. We can pick up rocks on Thunder Mountain any time."

The newshound lighted a cigarette, and leaned back in his chair. He relaxed, at peace with the world—completely unaware that Tom's direction finder would point to Thunder Mountain and the peril that lay waiting there.

In New York, Hamilton Quest had mailed a package and Sassoon had boarded a plane. The package held a set of fingerprints carefully preserved on a piece of glass. It was on its way by air to Washington, D. C. Sassoon was en route to Thunder Mountain.

CHAPTER 11

The Direction Finder

TOM'S KNOWLEDGE of radio had been self-acquired. As a result it was more complete and practical than it would have been through academic training. He had read and studied many books and magazines published especially for those who made radio a hobby, and had kept a scrapbook of sketches and articles of special interest. The scrapbook bulged with diagrams of hookups, designs for simple apparatus, and instructions for assembling makeshift but workable substitutes for high-priced equipment.

Tom sat at a desk in the living room with his scrapbook open. For two hours he had been busily sketching a plan of the direction finder he intended to build, while Whiz Walton dozed in an easy chair before the fireplace.

"There," said Tom in a tone of finality. He held his carefully scaled drawing at arm's length and eyed it appraisingly.

Whiz Walton opened his eyes and looked in Tom's direction.

"Finished?"

"Yes, Whiz. I think we'll find everything we need in the workshop. It won't take long to assemble the finder."

The columnist looked around the big living room. "I thought Gulliver was here," he said. "Where did he go?"

"To the kitchen."

"I got hungry." It was the big man speaking from the doorway. He entered the room carrying a Gargantuan sandwich in one hand and a pitcher of milk in the other.

"After that dinner?"

Gulliver said, "Shucks, it's three hours since I et. How long do yo' expect a meal to stay by a man?"

The reporter shook his head incredulously without replying.

"How yo' comin', Tom?"

"The drawing is finished."

Gulliver squinted at the clean, bold lines. "It don't make no sense to me, but I reckon my mind don't run to scientific things. How's it work?"

"It's really a simple gadget," Tom said. He pointed to the upper part of the sketch. "This is a spiral of wire mounted on a frame. It's like the antenna in some kinds of radios. It's mounted on a post, so I can turn it in different directions. I'll connect it to my battery-powered radio and tune in on the signals we're trying to locate. I'll turn the antenna back and forth until the signals are loudest. Then the antenna will be pointing in the direction of the signals."

"You'll know the direction of the disturbance," said Whiz Walton, "but how will you know where it's coming from? Might be ten miles or a hundred miles away."

"We'll work from a map," said Tom. "Gulliver has

some government maps of this part of the country. We'll make a reading from the ranch and draw a line on the map showing the direction of the signals. Then we'll go to Bliss in the jeep and make another reading. We'll draw a line on the map showing the direction of the signals from Bliss. Those two lines should be at different angles. We'll extend the lines on the map until they intersect. At that point we should find the thing—whatever it is—that's messing up the TV broadcasts."

"Downright slick," observed Gulliver through a mouthful of food. "I dunno where yo' pick up all this sort o' thing, Tom."

Tom grinned and looked pleased. He glanced at his strap watch. "It's still early. I'm going out to the shop and get started."

"Tonight?" asked Whiz.

"Sure, Whiz. Why not?"

The columnist yawned heavily. "Didn't get much sleep last night," he explained. "If you don't mind, I'll turn in."

Tom didn't mind. He and Gulliver said good night, and Whiz retired to his bedroom.

Gulliver said, "I reckon they's no use tryin' to persuade yo' to put off startin' work on the gimcrack gadget until mornin'?"

"For any particular reason, Gulliver?"

"Only that, knowin' yo' the way I do, I know blame well what'll happen if yo' go to the workshop."

"What'll happen?"

"Yo'll lose all track o' time. Yo'll stay at work on the thing until it's finished, an' that'll likely be most o' the night."

Tom looked sober and somewhat disappointed. "You're the boss, Gulliver. If you say I can't go to the workshop—"

"Now, dad-rat it, Tom, yo' know blame well I ain't one to say yo' *can't* do a thing. It's only that yo' came here for a rest. I want yo' to git the right amount o' sleep."

"It's early, Gulliver. If you'd give me a hand we could finish the directional antenna in a couple of hours."

"Me?" Gulliver looked surprised. "Me give yo' a hand?"

"Uh-huh."

The big man looked at the drawing and scratched his chin thoughtfully. "It ain't," he muttered, "my line, but I'll sure do anythin' that'd help."

"Then let's go!"

Though not a carpenter, Gulliver was handy with ordinary tools. In the shop, he proved to be a great help. He cut the required pieces of wood to size, planed them carefully, and sanded them smooth. Meanwhile, Tom strung a continuous length of wire on a framework of crossed sticks.

The two worked in silent absorption until long after midnight. When they had finished, the flat spiral of wire was supported in such a manner that it could be turned easily on a base. Tom had marked the points of the compass on the base, and, as a final touch, had mounted a pocket compass in one corner. He placed the apparatus on the workbench and turned it so that the base was aligned toward the north. Then he connected a wire to his small radio receiver and turned on the power.

Gulliver stood tense. He watched with all the concern of a fond father whose child is about to take its first steps.

"I—I don't hear nothin'," he muttered. "Mebbe it don't work."

"The radio is small," Tom said. "It won't bring in the distant stations unless conditions are just right." As he turned the antenna slowly an indicator moved around the perimeter of the compass.

"Wait!" Gulliver said sharply, with one hand lifted. "I hear somethin'!"

It was a dance orchestra, very faint.

Tom turned the flat antenna farther, and the music grew in volume. "It works!" he said.

"Yo' sure?"

"Can't you hear the music?"

"I can hear it, but this gadget is supposed to tell us where from it's comin'."

Tom tuned the instrument until he found the point of greatest volume. Then he looked at the indicator. "It's coming," he said, pointing with a finger, "from somewhere in that direction."

"Due east," said Gulliver.

The music stopped. The announcer gave the call letters of a station in New Orleans.

"We done it!" exclaimed Gulliver enthusiastically. He stuck out his hairy hand. "Shake on it, Tom. Just wait'll Whiz Walton hears that I had a hand in makin' this here hunk o' confusion! An' just yo' wait'll I tell Zeb Oliphant about it! I'll have that skinny old salamander stopped cold!" The big fellow beamed with delight and registered outlandish pride for his part in the night's work.

"This calls for a celebration," he continued. "Let's go into the house an' open a jug o' root beer. An' while we're at it, I'll fry up a skillet o' ham an' eggs. That'll just about hold us 'til breakfast time."

CHAPTER 12
Where Two Lines Meet

AFTER BREAKFAST Tom showed Whiz Walton how the direction finder operated, while Gulliver stood by and boasted shamelessly of his part in the construction of the device.

"Now," said the big man, "it won't take us long to find out what's frazzlin' up the broadcasts. Me an' Tom will make a readin' here, an' then another one in the town o' Bliss. From them two readin's, we'll know just where the trouble is comin' from."

"Before we do that," Tom said, "I'll have to make some adjustments in my radio." He reached for a screwdriver and began removing the back of the small, compact receiver. "It's designed for the standard broadcast. The disturbance is on the TV wave band."

"Thunderation!" Gulliver was disappointed. "I figured we was all set. How long'll it take yo' to adjust the radio?"

"It's quite a job," said the boy. "It'll probably take at least a couple of hours. Maybe longer."

Actually it was nearly noon before the radio had been adapted to the different wave length and Tom announced that he was ready to make the first check.

Whiz Walton had a map in readiness. It was a large-scale map, showing Gulliver's ranch, the surrounding ranches, Thunder Mountain, and the town of Bliss. The crackling noise came through just as it had on the television receiver and on the large console radio in Gulliver's living room. Tom turned the antenna carefully until the sound was at the highest level. "That's it," he said.

Whiz made a pencil dot on the point of the map that represented the ranch house. He aligned the map so it was in the same relative position as the direction finder, then held a ruler against the dot. With the ruler parallel to the indicator he drew a pencil line.

"The disturbance," he said, "is coming from over the border in Mexico, or from—" He stopped. The pencil line on the map ran directly through the center of Thunder Mountain. "—Or from somewhere in that direction," he finished thinly.

"That does it," said Gulliver heartily. "Now we'll load the whole shebang aboard my jeep an' take 'er to Bliss for the second readin'. We'll git there just about train time, which'll be a good thing, because we can pick up the mail."

Gulliver elected to sit in the rear of the jeep and hold the direction finder, in which he displayed paternal interest. Tom drove and Whiz Walton sat in the seat beside him. He held the rolled-up map in his lap.

In town Tom stopped at the doctor's house to inquire about Tex. The cowhand's condition remained unchanged. He was physically in good shape, but there remained a blank in his memory.

Zeb Oliphant came from inside the station to the platform, fuming and scowling because the train was late. "It's a plot," he declared flatly. "It's a communist plot to overthrow the railroad. We're bein' undermined an' sabotaged. I'm goin' to write a letter to Congress. I'm goin' to demand an investigation!"

Tom and Whiz had climbed out of the jeep, but Gulliver remained in his seat and his attitude was one of rare dignity. "When yo' git through splutterin'," he said to Zeb, "we'll git on with the scientific experiments that we came here to do."

The professorial dignity in the big man's voice stopped the little station master in the middle of a sentence. He stared open-mouthed at Gulliver.

"Yo' go around forgittin' to close yo' mouth," continued Gulliver, "an' yo're goin' to have trouble with flies. Yo'll have 'em nestin' in yo' back teeth."

Zeb closed his mouth, then opened it to say, "What's that thing?" He pointed to the direction finder.

"Oh, this?" said Gulliver deprecatingly. "This is just a little thing me an' Tom cooked up so's we could delouse yo' television pictures."

"What's it do?"

"It's somethin' like a divinin' rod."

"People use those things to locate water."

"Yep. This is sort o' like that, only it's to locate the thing that makes sputters an' sparks."

Zeb tilted his head slightly to one side. He squinted one eye. His Adam's apple moved up and down. "Come again?"

Gulliver handed the equipment to Tom. "Set 'er up right there on the station platform," he said. "They ain't no use tryin' to explain these scientific things to Zeb."

"Who says there ain't?" demanded the skinny agent. "If a big overgrowed baboon like you, Gulliver, can savvy what this thing is all about, then it's a dead sure-fire cinch I should be able to understand it."

Gulliver gazed steadily at Zeb with his shaggy eyebrows lifted. While Tom aligned the base of the direction finder, the big man said, "It's a simple matter o' 'lectronics. That's all it is, Zeb. We seen the frazzlin' on the TV an' on my radio, an' went to work from there. We whipped up that gadget last night, an' Tom wave-changed his radio this mornin', so's it'd be on the right beam. Now we're fixin' to make an alignment, which same Whiz Walton aims to chart an' check agin what we done at my place just before we left."

Zeb looked at Whiz. "Carnsarned critter!" he complained. "I don't know if I'm bein' explained to, swore at, or insulted!"

"I'm only tryin' to explain it to yo', Zeb," continued Gulliver blandly. "I'll give it to yo' in one easy sentence."

"Let's have it that way."

"Where the two lines meet, that's it."

There was a sound like crackling static.

Zeb said, "That's the way it sounded on my television."

"I think," Tom said, as he adjusted the antenna, "the direction is going to be different than it was before."

"That's good," observed Whiz. "We should have no trouble in spotting the place of origin." He placed a dot on the map to designate Bliss, then made ready to align the rule.

"This is it," Tom said, when the volume reached a peak.

The newshound moved the rule until it lay in the same

direction as the indicater, and ran his sharply pointed pencil along the edge. "Got it," he said.

"Do the two lines meet?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

Whiz pushed aside the ruler and bent over the map. Perspiration beaded his forehead. He stared, blinked, then looked again.

"Lemme see," said Gulliver, shouldering close to the map. "Where them two lines meet, that's the place we got to go an' find what's kickin' up the ruckus." He squinted, then said, "Now that's downright hard to understand. Look here, Tom! Accordin' to the direction finder, the trouble is comin' straight from Thunder Mountain!"

"There—there must be a mistake," said Whiz uncertainly.

"There can't be a mistake," said Tom. "We were mighty careful in making the readings."

For once in his life, the sophisticated, easy-talking columnist could think of nothing to say. Now, more than ever, Tom would want to go to Thunder Mountain. Nothing short of physical violence could stop the boy. As if in a dream, he heard Tom saying, "We can kill two birds with one stone. We'll go to the mountain and find out what sort of electrical machines are operating, and at the same time, gather some more of those rock samples."

And then the overdue train arrived.

CHAPTER 13
Mysterious Cargo

THE TRAIN'S ARRIVAL was the high point of the day for Zeb. It was his chance to be a man of importance. With an audience on hand he made the most of the situation.

Tom, Whiz, and Gulliver were at one end of the station platform near the radio equipment. Tom and Gulliver were amused as they watched old Zeb handling mail and freight, and heard him scolding and complaining. Whiz Walton studied the map and seemed lost in thought.

Zeb deposited the sack of incoming mail on the platform beside the station door, then scurried back with outgoing mail, muttering all the while.

Tom pointed to the mail pouch. "I wonder if there's a letter in there from Dad."

Gulliver glanced toward Zeb, who was assisting a trainman in the unloading of four wooden cases, each about thirty inches square. The cases seemed to be very heavy. "Mebbe," mused Gulliver, "I could git a look through that mail sack without havin' to wait 'til it's taken to the

post office. If I could sneak it inside the buildin' without Zeb seein' me, an' open it up—"

"Zeb wouldn't like that," observed Tom.

"He wouldn't know about it 'til it was too late to do anythin'." With one eye on Zeb, Gulliver picked up the sack and disappeared with it inside the building.

The trainman standing in the open door of the car that carried mail and freight called out, "That does it. I'll be seein' you, Zeb!"

"Get goin'!" retorted the old man. "You're late enough as it is."

At the last minute before the train began to move a stranger stepped from the passenger coach behind the baggage car. He walked along the cinders and climbed to the platform while the train pulled out. He was a man of medium height. He wore a dark suit and a black felt hat. In one hand he carried a briefcase. His face was untanned.

"I wonder," murmured Tom, "who he is."

Whiz Walton looked up from the map. "What did you say, Tom?"

"I was wondering about the man who just got off the train. He doesn't look like anyone who'd live around here."

The newshound's brow was furrowed. He studied the stranger for a moment, then said, "Somehow, he looks familiar."

"Do you know him?"

Whiz shook his head slowly. "I'm sure I've never met him, but I've seen him somewhere. I never forget a face."

The stranger was talking to Zeb and pointing to the

wooden cases that had been unloaded from the train.

"He looks," continued Whiz, "like Times Square."

"What do you mean, Whiz?"

"I mean, he looks like the characters who hang around the all-night bars and restaurants in New York. Not necessarily a crook or a gangster, but just a guy who's out for the fast dollar. I'd like to know what he and Zeb are talking about."

"Whatever it is," replied Tom, "Zeb is getting steamed up."

"Let's eavesdrop. If we move closer we can hear the discussion."

The two moved casually along the station platform to within a few yards of Zeb and the man in black. They heard the stranger speaking in a husky voice.

"What do you want me to do to prove I own these cases?"

"That," retorted Zeb heatedly, "is up to you. You say your name is John Sassoon, but how'm I to know you're tellin' the truth! Anyone could say the same. I'm responsible for them there cases. If they go to the wrong party, I'm to blame."

Sassoon's hand dipped beneath his double-breasted coat and came out with a large, thick wallet.

"Put your cash away," shrilled Zeb angrily. "Don't you try to bribe me!"

"I'm not offering any bribes. I'm simply trying to identify myself." Sassoon drew an envelope from the wallet. "Look at this," he said. "This was addressed to me at my New York hotel."

Zeb took the envelope and extracted the folded paper it held. "A bill," he muttered.

"Yes, a bill for the suit of clothes I'm wearing! But that's none of your business. All you have to do is compare the name on that envelope with the name on these wooden cases. You'll see it is the same."

Zeb held the envelope close to the top of the nearest case and made a painstaking comparison. At length he returned the envelope and asked, "You got any more identification?"

Hard lines appeared on Sassoon's face as he tried to keep his growing anger under control. "If you're trying to make a fool of me—"

"No such thing," cut in the station master. "I'm doin' my duty as I see it."

"Well, listen to me, you old goat—"

"Callin' me names ain't goin' to help you none! You show me one letter an' expect me to hand over all these cases to you. How do I know you didn't steal the letter?"

Sassoon had never before been in any part of the West, but he had read a few stories that dealt with the treatment of a tenderfoot. He couldn't be sure whether he was the victim of an overly cautious individual who took too seriously his small authority, or the victim of a hazing. Whichever might be the case, he was becoming increasingly angry. His fingers trembled. As he snatched the entire contents from one pocket of his large wallet, a folded bit of paper fluttered unnoticed to the platform. "Here," he said. "This is all the identification I have. If that doesn't satisfy you, I'll take the matter up with the railroad authorities!"

"You're doin' that right now," replied Zeb. "I'm the authority." One at a time he scrutinized each card, reading every word on both sides.

Meanwhile Tom and Whiz Walton were highly amused by the entire scene. It was then that a vagrant breeze brushed the platform and blew the bit of paper that had fallen from the wallet close to the reporter's feet. Whiz stooped and picked it up.

"What is it?" asked Tom.

"A newspaper clipping. I'll look at it later. It may give me a line on John Sassoon."

"Maybe we should return it."

Whiz looked at Tom and winked. "I," he said, "don't like that guy's looks." He put the clipping into his pocket.

Zeb returned the identification cards and produced a yellow form from his hip pocket. "You sign right here," he explained, pointing to the lower part of the invoice. "From then on, I ain't responsible for your cases."

Sassoon signed hurriedly.

"Now," said the station master, "you'd better make arrangements to move your property. I can't have them cases clutterin' up my station."

Sassoon nodded.

"They're a-plenty heavy. You're goin' to need a truck. If you say the word, I'll go down the road a piece, an' get Lige Summers. He does truckin' an' haulin'. He'll take your cases wherever you want 'em to go."

"I've already made arrangements to move the—the cases."

"Where you takin' them?"

"None of your business."

Zebediah ignored the declaration. "They're mighty heavy," he repeated. "What's in 'em?"

"That, too, is none of your business!"

A truck with canvas sides approached from the south.

The driver swung in a half turn, then backed to the station platform. He climbed down from the cab, leaving the motor idling. Another man stepped from the opposite side. Both seemed surprised when they saw Sassoon.

The driver said, "Boss, we didn't expect you to be here!"

Sassoon said something in a low voice that neither Tom nor Whiz Walton could hear, then brushed past the driver and climbed into the truck seat.

It took but a moment to drop the tailgate and slide the four cases from the platform to the truck. The truck moved away, traveling south on the highway that led through the center of town.

Then Gulliver appeared from within the station, holding a letter in one hand. "Here, Tom," he said, "they was a letter from yo' father. It came air mail as far as Lubbock."

"You, Gulliver!" shrilled Zeb. "Where'd you get that mail?"

"Out o' the mail sack. Why yo' askin'?"

"You opened the sack?"

"How else could I see if they was any mail for us?"

"You can't do that!" howled Zeb. "You've got no right to interfere with the United States mail! That sack has to be taken to the post office without bein' opened!"

"Yo' should o' told me that before I opened 'er."

"How'd I know you were goin' to loot the mail?"

"I ain't looted nothin'. I only looked to see if they was anythin' for me or Tom."

"For that you can go to jail!"

Tom feigned great concern. "Golly, Zeb," he said, "I'd

hate to have Gulliver go to jail. Here. You take the letter. Put it back into the sack. I'm sure Gulliver didn't realize the seriousness of his crime."

"Well-l—I reckon it'll be all right this time." Zeb turned to Gulliver. "But don't you let me catch you interferin' with the mail again!"

Tom opened and read his letter aloud. It was short and dealt only with the specimens of rock he had sent his father. It said substantially what Whiz had reported verbally. The rocks were described as commonplace and worthless. The tone of the letter was strange to Tom Quest. In contrast to previous letters it was formal, almost curt.

"It doesn't sound like Dad," he commented when he had finished reading.

"I'll tell yo' one thing, Tom," said Gulliver. "When he says them rocks are commonplace, he's downright wrong."

"You said that before," put in Whiz Walton quickly. "But you're no authority, Gulliver. Who are you to question the opinion of an expert like Tom's father?"

"I still say them rocks wasn't commonplace. What's more, I'd like to know what happened to the ones that we left in my house when we came here to town. Likewise, I'd like to know what happened to Tex while we was away."

"If he recovers his memory," said Tom, "he'll be able to tell us. As for the rocks, I'm sure I can find more of the same kind when we go to Thunder Mountain."

Whiz Walton said nothing, but he had reached a decision. In view of the latest development, the discovery that mysterious electrical impulses emanated from Thun-

der Mountain, he felt justified in laying all the cards face up on the table. He would wait until he could sit down in the ranch house with Tom and Gulliver. Then he would tell of his noonday meeting with Hamilton Quest and the scientist's keen interest in the specimens of rock. He would tell how he had found Quest changed at dinnertime, and about the urgent plea to prevent Tom from going to Thunder Mountain for additional samples of rock. With Tom and Gulliver in possession of these details, the next move would be up to them.

But Fate conspired to block the newshound's plan.

CHAPTER 14

A Loose End

WHIZ WALTON stood on the station platform and studied the clipping. "It's an Associated Press story," he said. "Datelined Galveston, Texas, June 15th."

"What year?" asked Gulliver.

"The dateline doesn't tell the year, but I remember the crime this clipping refers to. It was committed three years ago, and it was a national sensation. For weeks it had every lawman in the country on his toes."

"What was the crime?" asked Tom.

"A three-million dollar robbery preceded by a quadruple murder."

"I remember that."

"Me too," put in Gulliver. "It was just about the biggest crime that'd ever happened in Texas."

The newspaper clipping announced that four dead men who had been found stripped of clothing and credentials in a remote gully had been identified as the crew of an armored truck. The truck, according to the paper, had been previously found abandoned in desolate prairie country fifty miles away.

Whiz Walton summarized the crime chronologically. Three million dollars worth of gold bullion from the Far East had been brought by ship to Galveston. There it was transferred to an armored truck. The truck disappeared somewhere between the docks and the train that was to transport the gold to Fort Knox. It was a week before the truck was found, empty, and later when the bodies of the dead men were located.

"Reconstructing the crime," the newshound said, "it was generally assumed that the criminals intercepted the truck before it reached the dock. After killing the guards and driver and taking their clothes and credentials, the thieves drove to the dock, collected the gold, then drove out on the prairie. It was just about the perfect crime. As far as I know it is still unsolved."

Gulliver scratched his chin thoughtfully. "It seems to me," he said, "a good Texas Ranger could've cracked that case."

"The Rangers worked on it," said Whiz, "and so did the Treasury officials and the FBI."

"Weren't there any clues?" asked Tom.

"Only one that I can remember," replied the columnist.

"What was that?"

"A few fingerprints on the inside of the armored truck."

"They belonged to the thieves?"

"That was the generally accepted theory," said Whiz Walton. "Actually there were a lot of fingerprints on the truck, but they were all identified as prints of the dead men. One set, however, couldn't be identified. I remem-

ber when the photo of those prints came into our New York office. We published it in the paper."

"Golly," Tom Quest said, "those crooks must have been mighty well organized."

"You can say that again, Tom."

"Have there been any new developments in the three years since the robbery?"

"None as far as I know."

"It wouldn't be easy to turn that much gold into cash," observed the boy.

"You may be sure of one thing, Tom. Those men knew exactly what they intended to do with the gold before they stole it."

"They must have."

Gulliver said, "They's only one thing they could do with that much gold."

"What's that?" asked Tom.

"They'd have to move it out o' the country. They couldn't do nothin' with it in the States."

"A lot of people had the same idea, Gulliver. But moving that much gold out of the country would be almost as difficult as converting it into cash right here in Texas. Especially with every port watched by undercover agents. Three million in gold is a lot to handle. Have you any idea how much it would weigh?"

"Aplenty!"

"And then some." Whiz Walton folded the clipping and put it into his pocket. "I," he said, "often wondered how those crooks could move the gold at all. The alarm went out within an hour after the armored truck was due at the railroad station. Within another hour, road blocks

were set up. Every car and truck was stopped and inspected. Everyone driving on the highways was checked against the descriptions of the men who collected the gold at the dock. It was a crime that'll go into the books as a classic."

"I wonder," murmured Tom.

"Yo' wonder what, Tom?" asked Gulliver.

"Why did Sassoon have that clipping in his wallet?"

Gulliver shrugged his moose-like shoulders. "Yo' got me."

"I've been wondering the same thing, Tom," said Whiz. "Also, I've been wondering where I've seen Sassoon."

He placed a cigarette between his lips and lighted it. He exhaled smoke slowly as he said, "I'd like to make a couple of phone calls."

"They's a pay phone in Joe's store," suggested Gulliver.

Gulliver took his place behind the steering wheel while Tom and Whiz transferred the radio equipment from the station platform.

It took but a moment to reach the general store.

Farther south on the same main highway, Tex sat on the porch of Dr. Barton's house. He had been there when the canvas-covered truck went past with Sassoon seated between Lasco, the driver, and Zazzara.

"Hey, Boss," began Zazzara when the truck was a couple of miles past the house, "there's something maybe you should know."

"What is it?" replied Sassoon shortly.

"When I talked to you on the phone I told you about

a kid named Quest, who picked up some stuff on the side of the mountain."

"I remember," Sassoon nodded. "You said he'd sent some of the rocks to his father in New York. Well, I took care of that angle. Don't worry about it."

"I figured you'd take care of it, Boss, but I was goin' to tell you that the kid was at the station when you got off the train."

"I saw him."

"Did you know he was Tom Quest?"

"No, but I guessed as much. What about it?"

"I figured you should know, that's all. He probably saw you an' the two of us."

"Is there any way he can connect you with your visit to the ranch when you took the rocks he left there?"

"Uh-uh," Zazzara shook his head. "When we was at the ranch there was only one man around. I told you about him. He's the one I slugged before we took the rocks."

"It's all right then," said Sassoon. "As long as you're sure no one else saw you."

"There wasn't no one else, Boss. That cowboy was the only one who saw us at the ranch."

"And with him dead, there are no loose ends."

Zazzara turned toward Sassoon, wide-eyed. "Huh?"

"With the cowboy dead, there are no loose ends," repeated Sassoon huskily.

Lasco shifted his hands uneasily on the steering wheel and squirmed in the seat. He spoke without taking his eyes from the road. "Did you think we killed the cowboy?"

"Didn't you?" demanded Sassoon.

There was a pause.

"Answer me!"

Zazzara began nervously. "Boss, we—uh—we slugged him with a blackjack. We figured he was dead."

"Isn't he?"

Zazzara shook his head slowly.

"You mean he's still alive? You mean to tell me he can describe this truck and the two of you as the ones who stole those rocks from the house?"

"He—he's still alive, Boss."

"How do you know?"

"I saw him a few minutes ago."

"Where?"

Zazzara gestured with his thumb. "Back there. He was sittin' on the porch of Dr. Barton's house."

"He was? You mean to sit there and tell me he saw this truck go by with Lasco driving?"

"I don't think he noticed us," put in Lasco.

"Neither do I," said Zazzara. "As for the truck, there's nothin' unusual about it. There's trucks like this goin' along the highway all the time. I'm sure we got nothin' to worry about, Boss."

Sassoon was not to be mollified. "Maybe there's only one chance in a thousand that you were recognized," he said. "But I won't gamble even that much. If you were recognized it might mean the end of everything for us."

"I don't see why."

Sassoon looked at Zazzara disgustedly. "You have no imagination. That's the trouble with you punks. No imagination."

"What could the cowboy do if he recognized us?"

"First he'd get the license number of this truck. Second, he'd phone the sheriff's office, or the state police. Third, the radio alarm would go out. Fourth, road blocks would be set up. Maybe the alarm has already been given. Maybe we'll find a road block waiting for us somewhere ahead."

"They couldn't do much to us," replied Zazzara defensively. "That guy couldn't prove me and Lasco were the ones who slugged him. It'd be his word against ours."

"He's a Texan, and you're a couple of New York hoodlums! His word would be enough to put you both in jail for assault and battery. But that's not what worries me. If we're stopped, we'll have to answer questions. We'll have to tell who we are; why we're in Texas; and where we're going. If we lie, we'll be trapped. If we tell the truth, we'll have to explain why we're going to Thunder Mountain and what we're going to do with the type of machinery in those cases in the back of this truck. We can't lie, and we can't tell the truth!" The husky-voiced leader drew a snub-nosed gun from his shoulder holster and examined it carefully. "Are you two armed?" he asked.

"I am," said Lasco.

Zazzara tapped his coat. "My rod's right here in a shoulder holster. Why, Boss?"

"Stop the truck."

Lasco drew to the side of the highway and applied the brakes.

"If there's a road block," Sassoon said, "we're going to shoot our way past."

Zazzara frowned. "I don't like the idea."

"You don't have to like it. Anyway, you won't be with us."

"I won't?"

"No. You're going to walk back to town and keep an eye on that cowboy. Make sure he doesn't talk, if he hasn't already done so. Watch for a chance, after dark, and silence him for keeps."

"Even if he didn't see us?"

"Even if he didn't see us! It was a mistake to leave him alive. Correct that mistake. That man is a loose end, and I hate loose ends."

Zazzara shrugged his shoulders and stepped to the ground. "You're goin' on to the mountain?"

"Yes."

"What about me? How'll I get back there?"

"You'll have to walk."

"Walk!" exclaimed Zazzara. "It's twenty miles!"

"It'll teach you to be more careful. The next time you have to slug someone, don't leave loose ends." Sassoon turned to Lasco. "Get going and keep your fingers crossed. If we run into a road block, we'll be in for trouble."

There was a sound of meshing gears and the truck moved ahead. Zazzara watched until it was around the turn, then hitched up his belt and started back toward Bliss.

CHAPTER 15
Marked for Murder

WHIZ WALTON spent half an hour in the small, airless phone booth waiting for the easygoing long-distance operator to complete the call to the New York office of his newspaper. He was hot and sticky with sweat when he finally heard a familiar voice on the city desk.

He identified himself, then said, "Al, I want some information. Does the name John Sassoon mean anything to you?"

"Never heard of him," came the reply. "Who is he?"

"I don't know. He's a fairly well-dressed man of about average size. Speaks with a husky voice, and looks like the sort you'd find in Times Square restaurants in the middle of the night. I mean to say, he looks like one of the 'Fast buck' boys who sleep through daylight. There may be something in the morgue on him."

"I'll look," said Al.

"Do that, will you? And ask the other boys if they've ever heard of him."

"Want to hold the line, Whiz?"

"Gosh, no," replied the newshound, "I'm wilted! Call me back."

"Give me the number."

Whiz read the number of the telephone in Joe's store, then left the booth, mopping his face with a handkerchief that was already moist. Then he began a restless pacing back and forth. He leaped when the phone rang. It was someone inquiring about the mail. He paced some more until finally his nervous movement brought a complaint from the proprietor.

"You're wearin' a path," said Joe. "Why in tarnation don't you go outside with Gulliver an' Tom? I'll let you know when your call comes through."

The columnist glanced through the doorway and saw his friends seated on the cement block that served as a step before the door. He went outside.

"Yo' git what yo' wanted?" asked Gulliver.

"No. I'm still waiting. Why don't you have a phone put into your house, Gulliver?"

Gulliver turned and stared fixedly at Whiz for a moment. "Now that," he began placidly, "is a downright smart idea." He nudged Tom. "Yo' hear that, Tom?"

Tom grinned.

"Whiz asks why I don't have a telephone put into the ranch house. Do yo' suppose it's on account o' he figures I never thought o' havin' a telephone there?"

His eyes returned to Whiz. "Why don't yo' just call the phone company an' tell 'em to put one in? Just tell 'em they ain't nothin' to it. All they got to do is plant a row o' telephone poles an' string wires thirty miles across the open country. Maybe yo'll have better luck than I

did. On the other hand, maybe they'll tell yo' the same as they told me."

"Skip it," replied the columnist. "Forget I ever mentioned it."

"Have you made any progress?" asked Tom.

Whiz said, "Yes. I'm waiting for one of the fellows in the office to see if he can learn anything about Sassoon and call me back."

"I didn't like his looks," Tom said. "There was something shifty about him."

Gulliver said, "I wish I'd seen that there clippin' before he left the station. I'd o' asked him some questions about himself. I got a hunch that maybe he knows a thing or two about that there gold robbery."

"Hey, Slim!" It was Joe's voice from the interior of the store. "New York's on the wire. Come an' get it."

Whiz streaked through the store and into the telephone booth. There was another delay while the operator informed Al that his party was waiting. Then Al said, "I couldn't find much, Whiz."

"Did you learn anything?"

"Sassoon has no police record, but you were right about him being a night-owl character. Some of the boys have met him. He seems to be a harmless guy with no apparent source of income. He's not a big spender, but he always seems to have cash in his pocket. Apparently there's no tie-up with the rackets. He's not in politics. He doesn't own a car. If he has a gun, he's carrying it illegally. There's no permit in his name. I checked a little further and found no record of military service."

"Fingerprints?" asked Whiz.

"There aren't any here. There might be some on file in Washington. That's all I could get."

"Thanks," replied Whiz Walton. "If you get anything else write or wire me—General Delivery at Bliss."

"Wait a minute, Whiz!" Al said. "Don't hang up."

"Well?"

"Are you on the track of something?"

"Just curious, that's all. Be seeing you." Whiz hung up the receiver and left the store.

"Let's go," he said to Gulliver and Tom. "The dope I got wasn't worth waiting for."

The three piled into the jeep and Gulliver took the wheel. He guided the small car over the familiar cross-country route to the ranch house.

At the same moment Lasco turned off the concrete highway and guided the truck along a narrow, badly rutted road of dirt. It was the first of many turns that would eventually bring the truck to the far side of Thunder Mountain.

Sassoon relaxed and put away his gun. "Can't understand it," he muttered.

"What's that, Boss?"

"Are you sure the man you saw on the porch in Bliss is the cowboy you slugged at the Gulliver ranch?"

Lasco nodded. "I'd lay ten to one on it."

"Since a couple of years ago, I've been reading a lot about this part of the country and about ranchers and cowboys," Sassoon said. "They're supposed to have sharp eyesight. They're supposed to see everything. Now, why didn't that man recognize you?"

The driver shrugged his shoulders without comment.

"If he recognized you," continued Sassoon, "why didn't he do something about it?"

"Maybe he did, Boss. We ain't sure we're in the clear."

"I," said Sassoon, "have seen the way they set up a road block here in Texas. There's been plenty of time. And another thing, Lasco. Why is that cowman in town instead of on the ranch?"

"You got me, Boss."

"Who lives in that house?"

"A doctor. His name is Barton."

The truck bounced and jolted over the uneven road. Sassoon slid lower in the seat to a more relaxed position. His face was impassive as he tried to arrive at a logical explanation for the two details that stood as question marks in his mind.

"Are you sure," he asked after a lengthy pause, "it wasn't someone else you saw on that porch?"

"I told you, Boss. It's the guy we slugged."

"I hope so. I wouldn't like to have Zazzara rub out the wrong man." The husky-voiced man pondered during the entire trip to the mountain without guessing that Tex's mental lapse provided the answer to both questions. It accounted for his presence in the doctor's home and also for the fact that he had failed to recognize his assailants.

"Oh well," Sassoon said finally, "Zazzara will take care of him."

"Poor Zazzara," chuckled Lasco, "he's got a long walk ahead of him. He'll be lucky if he gets back to the mountain by breakfast time."

"If he doesn't rub out that cowboy," replied Sassoon grimly, "he'd better not come back at all!"

CHAPTER 16
Dust-Covered Papers

WHIZ WALTON entered the kitchen where Gulliver was preparing the midday meal. The big man looked up from the stove and asked, "Where's Tom?"

"Scrubbing up."

Gulliver sampled the concoction he was mixing in a large kettle on the stove, and smacked his lips. "Yo' can go into the dinin' room an' sit yo'self down, Whiz. We're havin' Son-of-a-Gun stew, an' she's first rate."

"I'm not hungry, Gulliver. I have something on my mind."

"What is it?"

"I'd like to read up on that Galveston gold robbery."

"I don't know where yo'll find any readin' on it unless yo' can dig up some old newspapers."

"That's what I had in mind. I'll have to go to some city that has a fairly large newspaper and dig into their files."

Gulliver pushed the kettle back from the fire. "Yo', Whiz, know things yo' ain't tellin'."

"Why do you say that?"

"Yo' know as well as I do that the nearest city is a darned sight more'n a hop 'n a skip from here. Yo' got some reason for wantin' to read about that there gold robbery."

"I'm playing a hunch, Gulliver. When a New York character like Sassoon appears in the southwest where the gold was stolen, and drops from his pocket a three-year-old clipping about the robbery, my spine begins to tingle."

Gulliver squinted one eye suspiciously.

"I've told you about that tingling I get," the columnist continued. "It's like the scent of game to a bird dog. It tips me off that further investigation is indicated."

"Yo' figure to solve that gold robbery?"

Whiz Walton grinned. "It would be a big story."

"What good will come o' readin' up the old newspapers?"

"I'd like to see how the thieves were described at the time and compare those descriptions to Sassoon and the men who met him in Bliss with that truck. At the same time I'd like to read the other details of the robbery."

Gulliver started ladling the rich, aromatic stew into a big stoneware tureen. "I was just thinkin', Whiz, we've got a lot o' newspapers piled up in the attic."

"You have?" asked the reporter eagerly.

"Yep. I subscribed to a San Antonio paper up 'til a few months back. I quit when they stopped runnin' my favorite cartoon. We'd toss them papers into the woodshed until they got piled high. Then we toted 'em to the attic. I reckon yo'll find 'em there runnin' back four or five years."

"Do you mind if I go up?"

"Help yo'self. But lunch is fixed for eatin'."

"I'm not hungry."

"It'll be a long time 'til supper."

"After the breakfast you dished up, I'll be able to wait without trouble. I'll see you and Tom later. How do I reach the attic?"

The attic was typical. Light, filtered through dust and cobwebs, came from dormer windows on both sides. Piled around the open central area, Whiz Walton saw the usual assortment of old trunks, discarded furniture, oil lamps, hardware, and boxes that might hold practically anything. He had eyes for none of these. He made a beeline toward the many piles of newspapers at the far end.

He blew dust off the highest pile and read a dateline. The paper on top was six months old. The one directly beneath was for the day preceding. He turned to another stack. The papers were older, but they didn't go back as far as the robbery in Galveston. He passed the third stack, and the fourth, and then he breathed "Eureka!"

A two-column headline slapped him squarely in the face. It said that arrests were expected shortly in the Galveston robbery. Whiz glanced at the date. It was July 15th. Opening a small pen knife, the reporter cut out the page-one item, then turned to page nine where the story was continued and clipped another half-column from the paper. He put the clippings into a pocket and tossed the paper aside. The paper for the 14th had another page-one story, and so did those beneath.

Meanwhile, Tom Quest and Gulliver ate their noonday meal without Whiz Walton.

Tom swallowed the last of his pie and said, "Gulliver,

I think we had better make a third reading to be sure of our findings."

Gulliver mopped up the gravy on his plate with a piece of bread and held it poised. "What yo' talkin' about, Tom?" he asked. "Make a third readin' o' what?"

"With the direction finder, of course," replied the boy. "I just finished telling you that we might go to Thunder Mountain on a wild-goose chase unless we doublecheck. Weren't you listening?"

Gulliver swallowed with a gulp. "I didn't hear yo', Tom. It's on account o' the radishes. Y'see, I grow radishes that are hot an' hard. When I eat 'em, they crunch. The crunchin' is so close to my ears, I can't hear what anyone is sayin'. Now what's this about a third readin'?"

Tom left his place and moved to Gulliver's end of the table. He brought a folded map from his shirt pocket and spread it out. "Here," he said, pointing, "are the lines we drew after making a reading with the direction finder here and in Bliss. The lines meet at Thunder Mountain."

"I see 'em," said Gulliver.

"Bliss is north of the ranch. I'd like to go south about the same distance and make a third reading with the direction finder. If that one points to Thunder Mountain, we'll be doubly sure the disturbance is coming from there."

"Yo' figure on doin' that this afternoon?"

"I'd like to. It's too late to start for Thunder Mountain, but if I make the reading today, we can start early in the morning."

"Trouble is, Tom, with Tex laid up, I've got to sort o' take care o' things here at the ranch. They's half a dozen details I should see to."

"Whiz and I can make the readings if you'll let us borrow the jeep."

"Yo're welcome to it, Tom, but I don't know as yo' can count on Whiz to help. He's steamed up about that there gold robbery."

"I wonder why?"

Gulliver shrugged his shoulders. "Yo' can search me, Tom. He wants all the old newspaper articles about it."

"Maybe he didn't tell us *all* he learned from his friend in New York."

"Could be."

"I'll go up to the attic and see what he has to say about a jeep ride."

Tom found the columnist seated cross-legged on the attic floor between two ragged piles of papers. His face, except where sweat had washed white streaks, was black with dust. His thin hair was disheveled and his hands were grimy, but he was grinning happily like a schoolboy on a junkpile.

"I," he said by way of greeting, "have hit the jackpot."

"Gulliver said you were looking for articles about the gold robbery."

"I found 'em. Look here!" Whiz pointed to his bulging pockets.

"Learn anything important?"

"I haven't taken time to read the clippings. I'm nearly through here. Then I'll clean up and study them."

The grin left the newshound's face as Tom told of his intention to drive south in the jeep and make a third experiment with the direction finder and the converted radio. "Gulliver can't go," he finished, "but you and I—"

"I'm sorry, Tom," interrupted the columnist, "I can't make it this afternoon."

"Why not?"

"I have a hundred clippings to read and study."

"But you can do that tonight or tomorrow."

Whiz Walton shook his head. "That won't do, Tom. You see, I—well, when I'm steamed up on an angle, I must stay with it or I'll go cold. Right now I have some theories about that gold robbery. I want to follow through on them. Why not postpone your reading until tomorrow?"

Tom said, "That would mean postponing the trip to Thunder Mountain until the day after tomorrow. I want to start for the mountain early in the morning. It's a long trip on horseback."

A more sober expression came into the face of Whiz Walton. "Tom," he began seriously, "there's something I must tell you."

"What's that, Whiz?"

"It will keep until tonight. I'll tell you after supper. Go ahead and make your reading. You can do it without my help."

Tom nodded and left the attic.

The reporter's manner during the last part of the short visit had undergone a curious change. His voice, when he spoke of having something to discuss, carried a hint that the discussion would be of a serious nature. Tom felt vaguely disturbed. It was a feeling that remained when he set out in the jeep half an hour later, accompanied only by the radio apparatus. He would have been even more concerned if he could have foreseen the events that were to make it impossible for Whiz to keep his promise.

CHAPTER 17

The Black Opening

AFTER A LITTLE RECONNOITERING, Zazzara found a place near an old vacant warehouse where he could sit unseen in tall grass and weeds and keep an eye on the doctor's house diagonally across the street.

Tex was sitting alone on the porch with his feet resting on the railing. His head was lowered with his chin against his chest. He seemed to be dozing.

Zazzara became increasingly uncomfortable as the hottest part of the day approached. There wasn't the slightest breeze. The air was motionless and stifling, and flies and stinging insects became more and more annoying. Moreover, the gun-carrying hoodlum felt bitter and resentful. He still smarted because of the things that Sassoon had said, and felt that he was unjustifiably blamed for what the Boss called "leaving a loose end." He didn't see why he, instead of Lasco, should be the one delegated to silence the cowboy. It wasn't the thought of murder that rankled, it was the knowledge that he would have to walk all the way back to Thunder Mountain after the murder had been committed.

Sassoon had said to wait until after dark. That would mean he'd spend the night returning to the rest of the gang at the mountain. He'd be lucky to get back by breakfast time.

"Then," he told himself, "with Sassoon on the job, I'll have to pitch in an' do my work along with the others. I won't get a wink of sleep. It'd be a lot better if I could finish this job now, an' start back. I'd get to the headquarters in time to catch some shut-eye."

He drew his gun from the shoulder holster and eyed it reflectively. He sighted through the weeds at the sleeping man across the street, then lowered the weapon. The range was too great. With a rifle it would be a simple matter to send a fatal bullet crashing into the head or heart of the cowboy. But with a pistol the odds were too heavy against success. Moreover, a gunshot at that hour of the day would be too risky. Though there was no one in sight on the street, there were many people within earshot who would be curious enough to investigate the crack of a .38. Escape, without a car, would be out of the question.

Zazzara wanted a cigarette, but smoke rising from the weedy growth in a community that was always alert for grass fires, would be just as sure to bring investigation as a gunshot. The fact that a cigarette was taboo increased his desire a hundredfold. He tried to think of other things.

Then he became thirsty.

He was cramped and hot and sticky with sweat. His throat was parched and his nerves were raw. There was a huge welt on his forehead where a mosquito had successfully attacked, and another on his neck. His physical

discomfort added fuel to the fires of his mental misery. He put away his gun and slapped at a bug that dropped from a tall weed to the back of his hand.

A door slammed.

Zazzara looked up.

A man and woman were standing on the porch. The cowboy was awake and talking to them. While Zazzara watched, the doctor and his wife descended the stairs from the veranda, and moved down the street toward the general store. A moment later Tex rose and entered the house.

Zazzara had an idea—one that would allow him to accomplish his mission hours ahead of time and make it possible to start the long hike to the mountain before anyone realized that a crime had been committed. He rose from his cramped position and looked around. The only people within view were the couple who had left the house, and they were entering the general store. Then no one was in sight. Furtively Zazzara moved from his hiding place, looked again in both directions, then sauntered across the street.

The screen door was closed, but the house door, Zazzara noted with satisfaction, had been left wide open. As he ascended the stairs and crossed the porch with catlike steps, he drew a long thin knife from his side pocket. He pressed a button and a spring flicked open a blade four inches long. It was a deadly weapon—and a silent one.

The screen door made not the slightest sound. Zazzara found himself in a hallway that was dim and cool. At one side a flight of stairs led to the second floor. In

the wall of the other side there was a wide opening into the living room. A door at the far end of the hall was closed.

Zazzara entered the living room. The window shades were drawn to keep out the noonday heat, but there was light enough to show that the room was empty.

The living room opened into a comfortable dining room. Beyond the closed door of the dining room, Zazzara reasoned, must be the kitchen. Cautiously, an inch at a time, he opened that door.

Tex, standing at the kitchen sink with a glass full of water from the tap in one hand, saw the door move. At first he thought the doctor must have returned prematurely. But it couldn't be Dr. Barton, or his wife either, for that matter, who moved the door so furtively. The cowboy placed the glass on the sink and waited expectantly.

Then he saw a face.

For a frozen split second Zazzara and Tex met eye to eye. In that infinitesimal portion of time, something like an electrical charge exploded in the cowboy's brain. It was recognition and recollection.

Since he had regained consciousness after being slugged, certain hours had been missing from his life. Now those hours returned, bringing with them every detail. He remembered Zazzara as one of two men who had arrived at the ranch house in a truck. He remembered the face of the other man and he remembered the truck.

There could be but one interpretation of the look in the intruder's face. Zazzara wore the expression of a man

who was geared to kill, and the ready knife confirmed it.

Zazzara's arm went up to throw the knife. Tex, unarmed, charged across the room with fists clenched.

Tom Quest knew there was no hurry about returning to the ranch house. Gulliver would be busy until suppertime and as for Whiz Walton, Tom knew that he would be occupied with his clippings for the remainder of the day, and probably far into the night.

He stopped the jeep on a rolling plain about twenty miles south of the ranch house and climbed behind the front seats. The radio which he had converted to a short-wave band and the direction finder he had made were on the floor. He checked the connections and turned on the battery-powered receiver. He heard the familiar discordant tone which increased and decreased in relation to the position of the loop antenna. Satisfied that the outfit was working properly, he oriented the apparatus and made some minor adjustments.

When the squeal was at its loudest pitch he spread out his map of the vicinity and made a pencil mark at the point of his present location, as accurately as he could reckon it. When he applied the ruler in a position paralleling that of the antenna and drew a line along its edge, he noted that this line—like the two preceding—ran straight to Thunder Mountain.

The mountain, clearly visible, looked different than it ever had before. It had always been a familiar landmark. Now it had assumed an aspect of mystery. It was a strong temptation to go there in the jeep. Tom could cover the distance to the foot of the mountain in less than an hour and be back at the ranch by suppertime. This, how-

ever, would serve little purpose. He knew from previous visits that the mountain's steep and rock-strewn sides could be scaled only on foot or on horseback. The place where he had found the rocks was halfway toward the peak.

He turned off the radio and drew a pair of binoculars from a leather case. Tom had often studied distant peaks through his high-powered field glasses, but always from the vicinity of the ranch house. This was the first time he had focused on Thunder Mountain from a point of view twenty miles to the south.

He saw something he had never before noticed, and his interest in the mystery mountain increased tenfold. It was an opening, like the mouth of a cave, about one-third of the distance from the highest point.

"Golly," murmured Tom, "I've never heard anyone mention a cave on Thunder Mountain. I wonder if Gulliver knows about it?" He adjusted the glasses to a sharper focus. "Maybe it isn't a cave," he argued. "It might be just a big black rock that looks like a cave."

This doubt inspired a decision. He would go closer and make another inspection. He placed the binoculars on the floor and started the jeep. As he drove directly toward the mountain with one eye on the place that looked black and empty, his conviction that it was a cave and not a rock became stronger with each mile that fell behind the little car.

A few miles from the base of the mountain, Tom reached a point where he could no longer see the opening. Here he stopped the jeep. He studied the mountainside through the binoculars and realized why the cave had hitherto escaped notice. It was set well back in a

niche of rock and could not be seen from any angle except the one that Tom had selected for his directional experiment.

Tom Quest had learned in early childhood to explore all things as far as possible. From Gulliver and his father he had long ago learned the importance of confirming every fact. He drove the jeep along the backtrail until the cave was once more in clear view. Then he turned at a right angle to his route and watched until it was obscured by the sides of the niche.

Turning, he drove in the opposite direction. When the opening was once more out of sight he stopped long enough to make a crude sketch of his discovery.

Looking at his watch, he was surprised at the lateness of the hour. "I'll have to streak," he told himself, "to get home in time for supper. But wait until Gulliver and Whiz have heard what I've found. Oh golly, won't they be surprised!"

CHAPTER 18
A Grim Summons

WHIZ WALTON sauntered into the kitchen where Gulliver was preparing supper.

"Did yo'," asked the big man, "finish with yo' readin'?"

The reporter nodded. "I've been through everything I could find, but I didn't learn much of any value. Several people saw the four men who picked up the gold in the armored truck, but as usual, there were conflicting descriptions."

"Did any o' them descriptions fit the critters we saw in Bliss?"

"Yes. But those same descriptions would fit about five million other men."

"That bein' the case," said Gulliver, "why don't yo' forget that gold robbery? Tom'll be back pretty soon all steamed up about them there noises that come from Thunder Mountain."

The newshound leaned against a table and lighted a cigarette. "Gulliver," he began slowly, "I'm going to tell you something."

"What's that, Whiz?"

"Frankly, I had hoped to use that old gold robbery to steam Tom up about something other than his trip to Thunder Mountain."

Gulliver turned and eyed Whiz Walton squarely. "How come?"

"I don't want him to go there."

"That don't tell me nothin'."

"Do you remember the rocks he brought back from the mountain?"

"The ones Quest said was worthless an' commonplace?"

The columnist nodded.

"That's one time Quest was wrong," Gulliver declared. "I said before, an' I say again—them there rocks was downright unusual. They had traces o' somethin' that looked like gold."

"That's what Hamilton Quest told me."

"He told yo' that?"

"Yes."

"Then why in thunderation did yo' come here an' lie about what he said?"

"I didn't lie, Gulliver. I told you exactly what he said."

"What about the letter he wrote to Tom?"

"At noon on the day I was leaving New York, Hamilton Quest called me on the phone and asked me to meet him for lunch. He was very much excited about the rocks. He said there was gold in them. He was going to make some further tests that afternoon, and asked me to come to his apartment for dinner before I went to the airport."

As concisely as possible Whiz Walton related the

strange change he had found in Hamilton Quest and told about the complete reversal of the scientist's opinion.

"Something happened during the afternoon," he finished. "I don't know what it was, but there was something that caused him to get rid of the rocks and tell me they were commonplace and worthless. He made me promise to tell you and Tom the same thing. Just before I left him, he said—and I quote—'Don't let Tom gather any more of those rocks.' "

Gulliver scratched his chin with his forefinger. "By gobs," he muttered, "Tex was slugged by critters who stole them same kind of rocks from this house. What in thunderation is behind it?"

"Your guess," said Whiz, "is as good as mine."

" 'Til now, I warn't much concerned about the specimens, but dad-rat it, Whiz, what yo've just said has made me frothy to find out more. I got a downright powerful hankerin' to take a close-up look-see at Thunder Mountain. I can't help wonderin' if them noises on the radio an' television are hooked up in any way with what you've said."

"I'm just as curious as you are, Gulliver. If it weren't for Tom and the promise I made his father, you couldn't hold me back."

"There won't be no holdin' Tom back either if yo' tell him the story."

"That's why I wanted to discuss it with you. I planned to tell Tom the works tonight."

"Yo'll make him more eager than ever."

"I know that," nodded the columnist, "but if Tom knows what his father said he'll sit tight. He'll probably

write or telephone his father. At least the responsibility will be off my shoulders."

"Let me think it over," Gulliver replied. "After we've et we'll talk some more before we talk to Tom."

There was the sound of a car approaching. It was not the open-throated roar of the unmuffled engine in the jeep, but rather the smooth purr of a high-powered car well muffled.

"Sounds like company comin'," Gulliver said, starting for the door.

"It's time for Tom," replied Whiz Walton.

A high-pitched voice called Gulliver's name from the front of the house.

"In the kitchen!" boomed Gulliver. "Come on out."

It was Dr. Barton who burst through the door. His face was red and his voice high-pitched with excitement. "Gulliver—" he began, then broke off as he saw Whiz Walton. "I—I thought you were alone."

Gulliver introduced the columnist, who shook hands with Dr. Barton.

"Yo' look an' act excited," Gulliver said. "Is it somethin' about Tex?"

"Yes! You'd better drop everything and come with me."

"To Bliss?"

Dr. Barton nodded emphatically.

"What's wrong?" demanded Gulliver. "Speak up, dad-rat it, Barton! Has Tex took a turn for the worse?"

"He— He may be dead by the time we get there."

Gulliver's face went livid. "I left Tex in yo' charge," he thundered. "He was in good shape except for what he couldn't remember! Yo' said so yo'self! I aim to hold yo' responsible if—"

"Wait, Gulliver! Wait a minute," pleaded the physician.

"Talk fast. What's happened to Tex?"

"My wife and I went to the store and left him alone on the front porch. We were gone about thirty minutes. When we returned, we found him and another man on the kitchen floor. There had been a terrible fight. A chair was smashed and the table tipped over. Tex had been stabbed in several places."

"How bad off is he?"

"He lost a lot of blood. He's very weak, but there's a fighting chance for him."

"Could he talk?"

"A little. He said he remembered what happened at the ranch and wanted to talk to you."

"Why didn't yo' say that in the first place? Why're we standin' here an' wastin' time? I'll be with yo' in two shakes! What about the other man?"

"It seemed that Tex had worked on him with his fists. He had bruises about the face and a fracture on the back of the skull as if he had fallen and rapped his head against the stove or sink. He was dead."

"Any idea who he is—or was?"

"I reported to the sheriff, and the word spread fast. A lot of people came to the house, including Joe and Zebediah. They had both seen the stranger. He was in Joe's store a couple of days ago, and at the railroad station this morning."

"This morning?" echoed Whiz Walton.

"Yes. He and another man came in a truck to call for a man named Sassoon who arrived on the train."

"Holy mackerel!" exclaimed the columnist. "I'm going with you, Gulliver."

"Yo' got to stay here an' tell Tom where we're at."

"I'll leave a note." Whiz jerked a pencil from his pocket and reached for a pad that was used to make out shopping lists of needed supplies. "If Tex can talk, he may be able to tell us something important. I'll want to ask him a few pertinent questions!" As he spoke, the reporter scrawled a hasty note.

Gulliver had covered the utensils that held the suspended meal, and pulled off the huge white apron he wore while working in the kitchen. "We're set," he told the doctor. "Let's git gittin'!"

Tom reached the ranch house fifteen minutes after the doctor's car had left with Whiz and Gulliver. He went through the living room to the kitchen where he expected to find his big friend engaged in his favorite task of preparing a meal. Instead he found a note in the familiar handwriting of Whiz Walton.

"*We've gone to town,*" the note said. "*Sit tight until we return. We may have news.*"

Tom had left Whiz with his pockets full of clippings concerning the robbery at Galveston. He knew that the reporter hoped to learn some new angle from a study of those clippings. It was, therefore, logical to assume that he had gone to make another phone call to New York in search of further information. It didn't occur to the boy to wonder about a means of transportation. He thought that Gulliver had borrowed one of the battered old cars belonging to the workers on the ranch.

He grinned inwardly. "Whiz," he told himself, "may have some news, but he's not the only one. Wait'll I tell him about the cave I saw."

CHAPTER 19
The Inquest

GULLIVER drove the doctor's car. After leaving the ranch he had pressed the accelerator to the floor and held it there. Whiz Walton sat on the edge of the rear seat, leaning forward and dividing his attention between the highway and the speedometer needle, which rested steadily at *100*.

The reporter held his breath and hoped the car would remain on the concrete highway and that the tires would remain intact. Doc Barton, seated beside the driver, seemed unconcerned about the burning speed.

"Gulliver," Doc said, "I want you to know I did everything possible to help Tex Wilson."

Gulliver replied shortly, "If Tex dies, I'm holdin' yo' to blame. Yo' left him alone in yo' house!"

"I told you he was alone for only half an hour."

"A professional killer," retorted Gulliver, "can kill a man in a fraction of a second. Me—I'm no professional, but even I could do it in a couple o' seconds. An' with my bare hands." Taking his eyes [illegible]he road for

an instant, he glanced menacingly at the doctor. "In fact," he continued, "I could throttle yo' with one hand, an' it wouldn't take no half-hour."

The doctor shifted his weight uneasily. "I didn't suspect anyone was out to kill your friend."

"Yo' knowed Tex had got rapped on the head."

"Yes, but—"

"Yo' could o' figured that the critter who done that might make another play. An' that ain't all! Yo' left him alone while yo' came here to get me. I'm holdin' that agin yo', too, Doc Barton!"

The physician stiffened. His voice had a sharp edge. "Gulliver, if you imply that I neglected my duties to come for you—"

"I ain't implyin' nothin'. I'm sayin' yo' should o' stayed with Tex an' sent someone else for me."

"There is nothing I could have done by remaining with Tex. I came personally only because this was the only fast car available. There is no one in town I'd trust to drive it."

"Yo're lettin' me drive it."

"Do you know anyone in Bliss who can handle a car as well as you?"

Gulliver glanced quickly at the doctor's face and decided that the question was sincere and not sarcastic. Some of the anger drained from his face. "Just the same," he said in a slightly milder voice, "yo' shouldn't o' left Tex Wilson alone." After a pause he continued, "Did yo' tell me Tex had got over that amnesia?"

"Yes," replied the doctor.

"Did he say what happened, or who cracked him on the head at the ranch?"

"No. He merely said he remembered, and wanted to

talk to you. I left my wife at his side. She has a pad and pencil to take down any statement he might make."

"I sure hope pore Tex will be able to talk when I get there."

Whiz Walton hoped so, too, but both were disappointed.

They found Tex unconscious when they reached the doctor's home. He lay on a bed, with his eyes closed; his tanned skin, drained of blood, had an unhealthy saffron hue. Doc Barton checked his pulse and found it weak, but steady.

The bedroom door was closed. Beyond the door, the law in Bliss proceeded with characteristic informality. A coroner's jury had surveyed the wreckage in the kitchen, then moved into the living room to consider the evidence and render an opinion while neighbors moved into the kitchen to clean up the mess. Under the direction of the sheriff, Zazzara's body was removed to the coroner's office.

Meanwhile, Gulliver, the doctor, and Whiz Walton waited silently for Tex Wilson's first sign of returning consciousness. Gulliver sat on the edge of the bed; the doctor in a near-by chair; while Whiz stood near the open window smoking steadily and lighting one cigarette from the butt of another.

"Isn't there anything you can do?" he asked after a lengthy period of silence. "How about a transfusion?"

"I don't know what type blood Tex Wilson has," replied the doctor. "And even if I did, I haven't the facilities to test the blood of prospective donors."

"What about plasma?" demanded the reporter. "Wouldn't that help?"

"It would indeed." A wistful expression came into

Dr. Barton's face. "But we have no plasma. If we were in a larger community with some of the newer facilities available, this man's chances of recovery would be many times greater."

Gulliver looked up and opened his mouth as if to speak, but closed it again without comment.

There was a soft rap on the door.

"I'll get it," said Whiz, quickly crossing the room.

It was the sheriff who had knocked. He stepped into the room and closed the door. Gesturing toward Tex, he said, "Anything new?"

The doctor shook his head.

"The coroner's jury is just about through," the lawman reported. "They sent me to get a statement from you, Doc; and one from Gulliver. It's in connection with the murder weapon." He held out the slim knife with the spring blade. "Namely this."

"What sort o' statement d'yo' want?"

"Gulliver," the sheriff said, "did Tex own a knife like this?"

"No."

The sheriff turned to the doctor. "Did you ever see this knife before?"

"No."

"That," said the sheriff, "is how we figured, but we wanted to be sure. We'll want those statements in writing, but that can wait."

Whiz Walton had his ever-ready notebook in one hand and a pencil in the other. "What's the opinion of the coroner's jury?" he asked.

"According to the findings," the sheriff began importantly, "a person unknown came into this house armed

with both knife and gun, with intent to kill. Said unknown intruder feloniously attacked Tex Wilson. During the struggle that ensued, the intruder was knocked down, and met death by accident when he cracked his head against a blunt object."

"Blunt object?" repeated Whiz Walton while his pencil skimmed over his notebook.

"Some of the men figure he hit the edge of the sink, and some say it was the edge of the stove, but that don't matter. The fact is, everyone agrees that the dead man came here intendin' to kill Tex Wilson. And that's the story that'll stand unless Tex tells us something different."

"Did you find anything to identify the dead man?"

The sheriff shook his head. "Nothing in his pockets. But the suit he was wearing came from a store in New York."

"Fingerprints?"

"We'll take his fingerprints at the coroner's and send them to the FBI as a matter of routine."

Whiz Walton nodded and closed his notebook.

CHAPTER 20
The Long Night

Tom Quest saw the meal that Gulliver had been preparing and deduced that his friends expected to be back at the ranch in time for supper. He ate a sandwich and drank a glass of milk to allay his hunger for an hour or two, then went to the bunkhouse.

Charlie Wind-Up was in the bunkhouse kitchen, washing dishes. He had seen Gulliver and Whiz Walton leave the ranch. He described the car that had called for them, and the man who drove it. Tom recognized the man as Dr. Barton.

"Didn't Gulliver say anything to anyone before he left?"

The Indian cook shook his head and said, "Not take time. Him come from house like angry she-bear on warpath. Him take reins of big car. Car leave like arrow from bow!"

"Gulliver drove?"

"Um." It was an affirmative grunt.

"The doctor must have brought word about Tex Wil-

son," Tom mused. "Maybe Tex regained his memory. Whiz said he might have news when he returned. That must be it."

Back in the house Tom Quest prepared to pass the time in research. He opened a cupboard in the big living room and brought out several well-filled photograph albums. Most of the snapshots had been made by Tom over a period of several years, and most of them had been made on Gulliver's ranch.

The boy had once made a hobby of photography and had set up dark-room facilities on the ranch. He had made enlargements of many of the snapshots. He found these in a big box on the cupboard floor. The box and the albums he carried to the rug before the fireplace.

Seated cross-legged on the floor, he went through the albums and enlargements, selecting every picture that showed any part of Thunder Mountain. There were a number of them.

In addition to scenic views of the mountain itself from several angles, there were nearly half a hundred pictures of people, equipment, and animals wherein Thunder Mountain might be seen in the background.

Tom studied every picture carefully, even using a magnifying glass on some. When he had examined the last one, he picked up ten which he had set aside for further scrutiny. With these, he moved to the big table and spread out his map, the one on which he had drawn three straight lines that converged on Thunder Mountain, from Bliss, from the ranch house, and from the spot on open prairie where he had made his latest reading.

He looked at the first of the pictures that had survived the culling. It was one he had made several years

ago, mainly to record an interesting cloud effect. He remembered taking it. He had used a yellow filter on his camera to bring out the clouds and he had walked about a quarter of a mile from the ranch house to get the most desirable angle. With a sharply pointed pencil he made a tiny circle on his map as nearly as possible to the precise spot where he had stood to take that picture.

The next photograph showed the same cloud effect, but in this one Tom had moved his camera farther from the ranch house to include a huge boulder in the close foreground. He had seen the same boulder this afternoon. His pencil made another tiny circle on the map.

He continued charting the camera location of each one of the photographs. At times he had to cudgel his memory, but in the end he was satisfied that every snapshot was represented on the map by a circle showing where the camera had been placed. Several of these circles came close to the black line Tom had plotted, but none was on that line.

At length the boy confirmed his earlier conclusion that the cave he had discovered that afternoon was visible from a highly restricted area.

Deeply absorbed in his work, Tom Quest lost all consciousness of time, but the study had taken several hours. He leaned back in the chair and rubbed his eyes, which were tired from the concentrated work.

He stretched and yawned, and closed his eyes for just a moment . . .

Quiet reigned and time stood still in Dr. Barton's home. The house was empty save for the bedroom where Tex Wilson lay, his condition unchanged.

The last to leave had been the neighbors who had pitched in to "give a hand" by cleaning up after the departure of the coroner's jury, and those who had come uninvited out of curiosity. Ashtrays had been emptied, muddy footprints removed, and the kitchen restored to order.

Whiz Walton flicked the butt of his last cigarette out the window and looked at his watch. "Two A.M.," he muttered.

Doc Barton rose from his chair and applied his stethoscope, as he had done so many times in the past few hours, to the chest of the unconscious man. After a pause he shook his head slowly and said, "No change." He turned to his wife and suggested that she go to bed.

"How long is this condition likely to continue?" Mrs. Barton asked.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

"Are you going to stay up?"

"I intend to stay right here until there is a change—one way or the other," the doctor declared.

"In that case," Mrs. Barton said, rising, "I'll start another pot of coffee." She left the room.

Gulliver had not spoken for hours. His stolid, unmoving manner was like that of an Indian. Fatigue had deepened the lines on his face, but he was alert to every movement in the room. Once an infinitesimal flutter of Tex Wilson's eyelids had brought the big man to his feet with bated breath and a sudden hope that this might be the first sign of returning consciousness. But it had been a false alarm.

The doctor's wife returned with a tray that held cups and a pot of steaming coffee. She placed it on the dresser

and looked questioningly at Gulliver, who shook his head.

"How about you, Mr. Walton?"

"No thanks. Not now."

"Just leave it there, Nellie," the doctor said. "We'll help ourselves."

Mrs. Barton nodded and departed, closing the door soundlessly.

The coffee grew cold without being touched.

Tom Quest dreamed of caves and mountains. He seemed to be driving the jeep on mountainsides and dodging caves that opened unexpectedly like gaping mouths. He twisted and turned the jeep in frenzied efforts to avoid being wrecked.

Then, without knowing how he got there, he found himself inside a tunnel, the walls of which were lined with gold and the floor covered with yellow rocks. He heard his father's voice insisting that the rocks were worthless and Gulliver arguing that Hamilton Quest was wrong.

"Wake up," Gulliver was saying. "Wake up, an' yo'll savvy that yo' dad has called it wrong. Wake up, Tom. Wake up."

But it wasn't Gulliver who spoke. And it wasn't Gulliver's voice that Tom heard. It was the voice of Charlie Wind-Up. Tom felt a firm hand on his shoulder, and opened his eyes. He saw the grinning Indian. The Indian said, "Wake up."

The lamp on the table at Tom's left had been turned out. Sunlight slanted through the windows of the living room. Tom looked up and smiled sheepishly.

"You sleep all night in chair?"

"I guess I must have, Charlie." Then Tom remembered. "Are Gulliver and Whiz back yet?"

"Not come back. That why me come see if maybe you want breakfast."

"Gosh, I am starved."

"You want me get breakfast?"

"Don't bother, Charlie. I'll eat with the bunkhouse crew."

"Too late," grinned the Indian. "Bunkhouse finish."

"Oh." Tom glanced at his watch. "Half-past seven!" he exclaimed. "Golly, it's later than I thought!" He pushed to his feet. "I have a lot to do today," he said.

CHAPTER 21
Gold and Killers

TOM'S MUSCLES were stiff and lame after sleeping all night in a cramped position in the chair, but a shower and a brisk rubdown with a coarse towel took care of that. The boy scrubbed his teeth and ran a comb through his damp hair, then dressed as quickly as possible.

Bright sun from a cloudless sky flooded the kitchen with cheer, and Charlie Wind-Up filled the air with the matchless aroma of frying bacon.

Tom sat down at the table and went to work on the morning meal with enthusiasm that brought a smile of delight to the face of the Indian cook.

"Big Chief stay long time in town," commented Charlie Wind-Up as he refilled Tom's plate from the skillet.

Tom nodded. "I hoped he and Whiz would be back this morning," he said. "I had something to tell them."

"You think mebbe they meet trouble?"

Tom grinned. "Gulliver can handle any situation he might meet in Bliss. He and Whiz Walton probably decided to stay in town all night so Dr. Barton wouldn't have to lose a lot of sleep to bring them back here."

Charlie Wind-Up nodded and cracked more eggs into the skillet.

In Bliss, Tex Wilson opened his eyes.

Gulliver took two steps across the room and roused Whiz and the doctor, who had been dozing lightly, then returned to the bedside.

"Tex," he said, "doggone yo', Tex, it's high time yo' got conscious."

The injured man looked at Gulliver and smiled thinly.

"Yo' feel up to talkin', Tex?"

"One moment," broke in the doctor. He held a small glass containing colorless liquid to Tex's mouth. "Drink it."

Tex swallowed the stimulant in small sips. It brought a trace of color to his wan face.

Whiz Walton, notebook ready, stood at the foot of the bed.

"I—I—" faltered Tex.

Gulliver leaned close. "Whisper it if yo' want," he said. "I'll git it."

"I re-remember," breathed the cowboy.

"Yo' remember who slugged yo' at the ranch?"

The reply was a slow nod. "He—he's the same man—came here—tried to kill me."

"A greasy-faced galoot with dark skin?"

"Yes."

"He wore a blue suit, double-breasted? An' a white shirt? An' a bow tie?"

"Tha-that's the critter."

Tex seemed to be regaining strength. His voice was stronger and he spoke with less faltering. "He and another man came to the ranch in a big truck."

"On the day yo' got slugged?"

"Yes. They asked a lot of questions about Tom Quest."

"What kind o' questions?"

"They asked his name, an' where he came from. Then they wanted to know why he'd stolen rocks from the side of Thunder Mountain."

"What'd yo' say?"

"I told 'em Tom Quest wasn't a thief, an' that as far as I knew, there was no one who had any prior claim to the rocks on the side of Thunder Mountain. They told me I was wrong. They said they worked for the man who owned that mountain."

Whiz Walton cut in quickly. "Did they say who owned the mountain?"

Tex shook his head. "Nope."

Gulliver said, "That's a new angle. I never thought o' anyone ownin' that worthless land. But go on, Tex. Tell us the rest."

"One moment," interrupted the doctor, "I don't want this man to overdo it." He drew back the sheet and placed his stethoscope against Tex Wilson's chest.

Gulliver watched the face of the physician with a shrewd and calculating eye. He knew before the doctor spoke that the invalid's condition was encouraging.

"Fine," muttered Dr. Barton. "Doing fine."

"Now go on," said Gulliver. "What else did those sidewinders have to say?"

"They wanted to know what Tom did with the rocks he brought away from the mountain."

"Yo' told 'em?"

"I told 'em it was none of their gosh-darned business. One of them made a pass at me with his fist. I sidestepped an' jabbed him in the belly. While I was doing that, the other one brought a blackjack out of his pocket. I saw it comin', but there wasn't time to dodge. That's all I remember until I found myself in Doc Barton's house."

"Which o' them hombres slapped yo' head with the blackjack?"

"The one who came here with the knife."

"He," observed Gulliver slowly, "won't slap anyone else."

Tex looked at the big man questioningly.

"He's dead."

"How come?"

"I reckon yo' worked yo' fists on him while yo' was fightin' in the kitchen."

Tex half rose to a sitting posture, but Gulliver pushed him back against the pillow. "Don't rear up on that account," he said. "Yo' didn't hit him fatal. He fell an' cracked his head on the sink, or mebbe the stove."

"But you say—he's dead?"

"Deader'n a dodo."

"Now," instructed the doctor, "I want you to stop talking and rest until I return. I'm going to ask Nellie to prepare a little broth for you."

While the medical man was gone, Whiz Walton fitted the new revelations into what had already been learned or assumed.

"After they slugged Tex," he said, "they went into the house and found some of the rocks on the table. There, also, they found paper and string, and correctly reasoned

that some of the rocks had been packed for mailing."

Gulliver nodded. "So they came here to Bliss," he added.

Whiz Walton cut in eagerly. "Gulliver, you remember last night when Zeb Oliphant and Joe and a lot of others were in this house?"

Gulliver nodded.

"We were trying to identify the dead man. Zeb told of seeing him at the station."

Gulliver nodded. "Yo' an' Tom saw him too. He an' his sidekick came to meet that critter named John Sassoon."

"That's right," replied Whiz Walton. "You missed the whole thing because you were inside the station looking through the mail sack. Joe told us last night that the dead man had been in his store asking a lot of questions about the package Tom had sent to New York."

"That's so."

"And he told us the man went to the telephone and called long distance. I'll bet all the tea in China we'll find that he called New York. We'll check with the phone company. They'll have a record."

Long experience had made Whiz Walton an expert at selecting significant shreds of information and piecing them together. He talked rapidly while his pencil scribbled notes in his notebook. "It all fits together," he continued. "Tom shipped the stones to his father in New York. The greaseball who died found it out and telephoned a New York contact—probably that guy who lost the clipping.

"In New York, Hamilton Quest found gold in the rock. Gold in a most unusual state. He was very much

excited when he told me about it at noon. Between then and dinnertime, someone got to him and made him change his story."

Gulliver scratched his bristling beard, and his face took on lines of perplexity in addition to those of fatigue. "Where in tarnation," he grumbled, "does that leave us? What d'yo' reckon it means, Whiz?"

"It means that something's going on, on Thunder Mountain. There's gold involved—gold and killers."

The columnist made marks in his notebook. "We'll check as to the ownership of Thunder Mountain—have to do that at the county seat—we'll see if that property has recently been sold, and if so, to whom. Also check long-distance phone calls out of Bliss. When I get the number that was called from Joe's store, I'll have my New York office find out whose phone it is."

The reporter's voice had dropped low. He seemed to be addressing no one, but rather merely thinking aloud.

"Gold and killers," muttered Gulliver. "Now there's a combination that spells trouble. It always has, an' it always will. Gold an' killers. They go together like ham 'n' eggs."

CHAPTER 22

Tom Rides Alone

A BOWL of strength-giving broth prepared by Mrs. Barton did much to improve Tex Wilson's condition. The doctor gave assurance that, barring unforseen complications, the invalid's recovery would be complete.

"Yo'," said Gulliver, "better make sure they ain't no complications."

With the crisis past, Whiz Walton became restless. He wanted to get busy running down the various items in his notebook. "First," he said, "I'd like to check the ownership of Thunder Mountain. How long does it take to reach the county seat?"

"Six hours," replied the doctor, "if you go by train."

"In a car?"

"In a good car you might make it in three hours."

"Two," put in Gulliver shortly. "If yo' got a fair-to-middlin' driver at the wheel." He finished modestly, "I could probably shave er' down to an hour an' a half."

"Do you know anyone who'd rent a car to me?" The columnist was looking at Gulliver, but the question was meant for Dr. Barton. And the doctor understood the broad hint. He squirmed uneasily.

"Yo' aim to drive to the county seat?" demanded Gulliver.

"Yes."

"No good."

"Why not?"

"Yo' wouldn't get nowhere. Those galoots in the land office would spot you as an outsider, an' they wouldn't tell yo' nothin'."

"Would they give you information?"

Gulliver grinned. "Yo' kiddin'?" he asked.

The good doctor broke in hesitantly. "You've both been a long time without rest," he said. "And you've been under a severe strain. Let me drive you to the ranch so you can sleep a few hours."

"Yo' thinkin' about our health, or about yo' car?" demanded Gulliver.

"What has my car got to do with it?"

"Yo' know blame well that we aim to start for the county seat in yo' car as soon as we git outside of a warm breakfast."

The doctor said, "But you do need rest."

"This ain't the first time me an' Whiz has gone without sleep. How about that, Whiz?"

"That's right," agreed the newshound.

"If a man eats a good breakfast, it'll take the place o' rest. I'll go see what I can find in yo' kitchen."

The doctor nodded helplessly, and Whiz grinned. He was glad to see that Gulliver, after the long night of worry, was once again his swashbuckling self.

After breakfast, Tom Quest prepared for his excursion. Now he had a threefold purpose in going to Thunder Mountain. He wanted to investigate the cave; he wanted

to determine if possible, the cause of the radio and television disturbance; and he wanted to bring back specimens of the curious ore that his father had called commonplace and worthless.

Boylike, he thought first of food. He'd need something for a midday meal, and he decided on sandwiches. He made a plentiful supply and wrapped them carefully in waxed paper. These he could eat when he chose, even while in the saddle without the bother of building a fire and cooking.

Into the saddlebag with the sandwiches he packed a small kit of first-aid supplies. There was an extra saddlebag which he intended to fill with specimens of rock. He carried a clasp knife in his pocket and wore a hunting knife on his belt. To these items he had added binoculars and two canteens, one holding water, the other milk. He tucked a pair of sunglasses into the pocket of his shirt, tied a bandanna around his throat, and he was ready.

After that he waited with increasing impatience for the return of Gulliver and Whiz Walton. By half-past ten he decided to wait no longer. He carried his gear to the saddle shed and took a coiled rope off a peg, then went to the near-by corral. It took but a moment to toss a loop over the head of his favorite horse and lead it to the shed.

Charlie Wind-Up appeared while he was saddling the animal, and looked at him questioningly. "You ride?"

Tom nodded. "I'm going to ride to Thunder Mountain, Charlie."

"You not wait till Big Chief get back?"

"I can't wait any longer if I expect to get back here by suppertime."

Tom tightened the cinch and hung the coiled-up rope

on the saddle pommel. He tied the saddlebags in place, then swung to his seat and left the shed with a wave to the silently watching Indian.

He rode at a steady, ground-covering gait on a straight line toward Thunder Mountain. The distance was deceptive in the clear Texas atmosphere. Strangers, particularly those from the East, would have guessed that the mountain was within an easy hour of riding. But, as Tom knew from previous experience, it was three times that far away.

At noon he had covered about half the distance when he drew rein beside a water hole. While the horse drank gratefully, Tom soused his face and neck to remove some of the sweat and dust of travel. He drank from his canteen, then continued on his way.

The mountain seemed to grow in size. Actually it was a majestic formation of earth that stood alone. It was not a part of any range of mountains. There were no other mountains near, nor any hills. It seemed as though this single pyramidal mass had been dropped and forgotten by the gods of creation on their way to build the Rockies.

Nearing the base of the slope, Tom ate a couple of his sandwiches, washing them down with milk. He glanced at his watch. One-thirty. He was right on schedule.

To reach the ranch by seven he planned to begin the return trip at four o'clock. This allowed two hours and a half to explore the side of the mountain. The boy had no hint that it would be hopelessly impossible to follow his schedule. There was nothing to foretell the grim events that made dubious the likelihood that he would ever return.

Tom's horse was small and wiry. Descended from a

line of Indian mustangs, it was without fear or nerves. Moreover it was as sure-footed as a mountain goat. It was an ideal horse for use on the rocky side of Thunder Mountain.

At the beginning of the climb the slope was gentle, but it soon became steeper. The grassy turf gave way to slate and gravel that slipped and rolled with every step. Tom slacked the reins and gave the horse its head, knowing it would pick firm footholds while following a fairly straight line toward the rounded cap of the mountain.

The place looked the same as it had when Tom had gone there before, but something about it seemed different. The difference was in nothing tangible. It was nothing Tom could see or hear; it struck deeper than the five senses of perception. It was as if the entire mountain had become shrouded by an invisible aura of mystery. Tom's feelings couldn't be defined. He was not afraid, but he was vaguely uneasy. He had a feeling that he was being watched. He felt that he was not alone in Thunder Mountain.

Presently he reached a place where the degree of slope increased sharply. He drew rein and dismounted.

The ground was covered with rocks of every size including boulders that weighed several tons, and pebbles. The rock was all of the same commonplace variety except for one small patch. This patch had nothing in common with the rest of the mountainside. Here the rocks were more uniform in size, varying from the size of walnuts to something a little larger than a man's fist, and the chemical content was different. It was from here that Tom had gathered the specimens he had sent to his father—and the ones that had been stolen from the ranch house.

As he filled a saddlebag, the boy wondered how this one small area had become littered with the stones that were so different. It was almost as if someone had lugged them here in baskets and dumped them. This explanation gave rise to a question that, at the moment, had no answer: *Why?*

Tom fastened the flap of the saddlebag and patted his horse on the neck. "From here on it'll be tough going, Paint," he said.

And it was!

Above the place where the mysterious ore lay on the ground, the slope was steep and treacherous. Several times the small hoofs of the horse dislodged loose rocks that started minor slides. Once Paint stumbled to his knees and only expert horsemanship saved Tom a spill over the animal's head. After this the smart little mustang was more cautious than ever.

Tom had planned to go straight toward the crest until he reached a spot at approximately the same level as the cave, then make a left turn at a right angle to ride along the mountainside at this level. This course should take him to the cave.

From a distance the mountainside had appeared to be fairly smooth, but at close acquaintance it proved to be surprisingly rugged. There were unexpected cuts and gullies and many perpendicular walls, some twenty or more feet high. The boy had to deviate from his chosen route, but he managed to continue toward the top.

After an hour in the saddle he drew rein.

"I think this is it," he muttered to the horse. "We're just about as far from the top of the mountain as the cave. Now we'll cut to the left and see if we can find it."

He was looking uphill. Suddenly he saw a curious phe-

nomenon that held his attention. For no apparent reason a small mass of loose rocks started sliding downwards. It was a tiny landslide that involved only the smallest of stones and it traveled less than five yards.

"Now what caused that?" Tom asked himself.

There was another, slightly higher on the slope above. And then another on the right.

While the boy sat watching he counted no less than a dozen of these mysterious landslides in miniature.

While wondering about them, he discovered something else. His horse was tense. This was unusual. The animal generally made the most of a breathing spell by laying back its ears and drooping its head in relaxation, but now Paint was tense in every muscle. The head was high and the ears cocked forward alertly.

"What is it, Paint? What's the trouble?"

The horse remained motionless as a statue.

Tom's knees, pressing against the *sudaderos* of his western saddle felt a tremor.

"Are you trembling, Paint?"

Even as he asked the question, the boy knew that the answer was negative. The vibration was steadier—more constant than a muscular movement. It seemed to come from the ground.

Tom confirmed this by dismounting. He could feel the trembling earth beneath his feet. Could it be an earthquake? No. Tom had been in earthquakes. This was different. There was no sudden shock—no movement of varying intensity. This was a steady, constant throbbing such as ponderous machinery might cause.

The vibration accounted for the little rockslides. At least one mystery was solved. But what caused the vibration?

Could the vibration be associated with the baffling electrical disturbance that originated somewhere near the mountain?

Was there massive machinery underground? If so, how was it taken there? And why?

Tom's brain fairly reeled with questions. He glanced at his watch.

There were eyes that watched the boy swing to the saddle.

They were evil eyes in a face that was marked by lines of cruel brutality. They were the eyes of a man who would not hesitate to kill anyone who stood between himself and a desired objective.

CHAPTER 23

Capture and Oblivion

A HORIZONTAL LEDGE as flat as the top of a table extended over fifty feet beyond the mouth of the cave, which was in a perpendicular wall. This ledge made it impossible to see the opening from below except at a distance of several miles. And at that distance the black hole would probably escape notice unless, as in Tom Quest's case, there was extraordinary curiosity about the mountain. Even at a distance the cave was visible only to one who was in a direct line. From either side of a direct line, view was cut off by huge rocks that stood like buttresses against the wall.

Though visibility of the cave was highly restricted, visibility from the ledge was unlimited. From that shelf one could see the vast expanse of plain and Gulliver's ranch. The highway appeared as a white ribbon, and on clear days the town of Bliss and the railroad tracks looked like a miniature village beneath a Christmas tree.

At all times, both day and night, a sentinel was posted

on the ledge. Tom Quest had been watched through powerful binoculars when he had gone out in the jeep to use the direction finder. The doctor's arrival and departure had been observed and noted on a written report. And Tom's movements had been eyed from the time he left the ranch that morning.

Lasco was flat on his belly watching the side of the mountain to the left of the ledge. Presently he heard Sassoon's husky voice.

"What's going on?"

The Boss stood in the opening to the cave.

Lasco gestured for silence by placing a finger to his lips, then snaked backward to Sassoon's side. Gaining his feet, he said, "Company's comin'."

"Who?"

"The kid."

"Tom Quest?"

Lasco nodded and grinned. "I've been watchin' him for over three hours. He left the ranch about ten-thirty."

"Where is he now?"

"Over that way," gestured Lasco. "He's out of sight behind outcrops of rock right now, but he's headin' this way. If he keeps comin' he'll find the ledge—an' then the cave."

Sassoon nodded silently.

"He stopped on his way up the slope," continued Lasco, "an' filled his saddlebag with more of the samples of rock we left down below. Then he kept climbin'. You listen careful an' you'll hear his horse."

"Better get out of sight." Sassoon gripped Lasco's arm and drew him back into the darkness. "We'll wait here until the boy reaches the ledge."

"Good idea, Boss."

During a brief silence the sound of clumping hoofs came clearly into the cave.

"Any word from Zazzara?" asked Lasco.

"No." The reply was curt. "Now be quiet. The kid's gettin' close."

Tom's sure-footed horse felt each step cautiously on the treacherous ground. The slope at this point was steeper than ever, and a single misstep would send both horse and rider sliding and rolling down the face of the mountain. Not far ahead Tom saw a ledge that would make a splendid place to rest the horse and decide on the route beyond that point.

It was nearly four o'clock. Tom had used up the time he had allotted to himself. It was time to start the trip home. He didn't know whether to go over his backtrail or try an unknown route down from the ledge.

He could still feel the vibrations in the ground, and at times he seemed to hear a deep-throated rumble. But this might have been imagination.

He reached the ledge.

And then he saw the cave.

He saw it as he dismounted. Coming on it so unexpectedly, he could hardly believe it was the same black opening he had viewed through binoculars from far away.

And then he heard the voice!

It was a merciless voice and it came from the darkness inside the cave.

"Put your hands up an' don't move!"

Two men came from the mysterious depths, both holding ugly, short-barreled guns.

"Welcome," one of the men said. "Welcome to Thunder Mountain."

Tom recognized both men. He had seen them at the station in Bliss. Sassoon, the well-dressed one, had arrived on the train and claimed the heavy wooden cases. The other man had driven the truck that called for the cases and picked up Sassoon as well.

The boy's brain whirled with overlapping thoughts. His first impulse was to flee, but this he rejected as hopeless. He would be shot down before he could take two steps. That these grim, hard-faced men would shoot, he had no doubt. At the moment submission seemed to be the only thing to do.

"Got a rope?" asked the husky-voiced man.

"Just inside the cave," replied the truck driver.

"Get it, Lasco."

The man called Lasco pocketed his gun and disappeared. In a moment he came out of the cave carrying a five-foot length of strong rope.

Then Lasco, advancing toward Tom, made an unforgivable mistake. He stepped between the boy and Sassoon. During that instant Sassoon could not fire at Tom without hitting his partner.

"You fool," rasped Sassoon. "Move aside!"

But Tom was already in motion. He dropped his fists, lowered his head, and charged straight at Lasco.

Lasco's sharp cry of surprise ended in a gasp as Tom's shoulder caught him just above the belt. Tom hit the man with every ounce of strength in an effort to send him staggering backward against Sassoon, in the hope that Sassoon would drop the gun. It was a desperate gamble and it nearly worked. The very audacity of the

attack caught Lasco wholly off guard. He staggered backward, clawing at empty air. And he would have fallen against Sassoon. But Sassoon sidestepped with the nimble grace of a ballet dancer.

Tom's charge carried him forward. He, too, was off balance. He sprawled to the ground, rolled quickly, and tried to leap to his feet.

Sassoon raised his gun and brought it down like a club, squarely on the top of the boy's head.

Tom was aware only of a million dazzling streaks of fire, then nothing.

Sassoon spat disgustedly. He looked at the unconscious captive, then at Lasco, who sat on the ground holding his stomach and looking as though he were going to be sick.

"Get up, Lasco. The kid's unconscious, now. Maybe you can tie him without making more of a fool of yourself."

With an angry curse, Lasco moved to obey. Straddling Tom's knees, he drew his hands together and tied them at the wrists. Sassoon watched approvingly. When the job was done he looked off into the distance.

"Beautiful view from here," he murmured. "A beautiful view."

Had Sassoon used a pair of powerful binoculars, he could have seen a car moving along the distant highway in the direction of Gulliver's ranch.

CHAPTER 24
Gulliver's Homecoming

DR. BARTON drove at a steady fifty miles an hour in spite of Gulliver's constant urging to go faster. On the rear seat Whiz Walton slept with an expression of disgust still stamped on his face.

The trip to the county seat had been a waste of time. First Gulliver and the reporter had waited for over half an hour on a hard bench in a dusty room while a languid girl conferred with a clerk. The clerk, when he appeared, was new on the job. He had never heard of Thunder Mountain. Gulliver had finally pushed past a gate and located the mountain on a large map.

Another clerk had been called. There was a conference that moved into an inner office. More waiting. Then a search through dusty files that gave up nothing.

At last someone thought of looking through the recent title transfers. There were only a few of these. One defined a certain parcel which, when plotted on a map, was

found to include the mountain and the land around it. Even then, Whiz and Gulliver had nothing. The name of the new owner was meaningless and no one remembered having seen him.

Back in Bliss to return the borrowed car, Gulliver had waited while the columnist checked phone calls. The long-distance operator gave him the numbers that had been called on a specific day. One to New York was identified as having been made by the man who had died in the attempt to murder Tex Wilson. Whiz called his office in New York and held the line while a check was made. He received word that the person called was John Sassoon.

"Dead end," had been the newshound's observation. "It connects Sassoon to the dead man, but we already knew that they were in some sort of deal together, so it gives us nothing new. I hoped we'd get another name to work on."

The doctor had generously offered to drive the two men home. They had looked in on Tex and found him resting comfortably, then started for the ranch.

It was half-past four when Dr. Barton reached the house.

Charlie Wind-Up came to meet the car. "Gone long time," he said.

"Too blame long," growled Gulliver, stepping to the ground.

Whiz Walton opened his eyes and looked around. "Where's Tom?" he asked.

"Him go ride horse."

Gulliver grunted. "Glad he didn't hang around an' waste the day waitin' for us." Turning to the doctor, he

said, "Thanks for the lift, Doc. Fact is, thanks for everythin'." He extended his big hand.

The doctor shook hands and smiled. "I'll send Tex back to you as good as new," he promised. After shaking hands with Whiz, he drove away.

Gulliver was pulling off his shirt as he entered the house. "First of all, I'm goin' to take a bath an' git rid o' the smell o' that there land office."

"Good idea," Whiz agreed. Crossing the living room, he stopped short. "Look here," he said, pointing to the table where Tom had been working. "I wonder what Tom was doing with those pictures?"

Gulliver, shirt in hand, moved close. "This," he said, pointing to the nearest picture, "is Thunder Mountain." He eyed the next. "An' so's this."

Whiz Walton ran through the pictures quickly. "They're all of Thunder Mountain!" he exclaimed. "As soon as we see Tom, we've got to kill his interest in the place! We've learned from what went on in the doc's house that Tom stirred up a hornet's nest when he took those specimens of rock!"

"Call it a rat's nest!"

"Whatever you call it, Gulliver, rats or hornets, they're playing for keeps and murder is just part of their game!"

Gulliver bellowed, "Yo', Charlie!" He could have been heard in the bunkhouse.

"Me here." The Indian had followed them into the house and stood less than five feet away.

"What was Tom a-doin' here?"

"Not know. Him work late last night. Fall 'sleep at table."

"Did he say where he was goin' today?"

"That right. Him say."

"Where?" thundered Gulliver. "Speak up, yo' red-skinned totem pole! Where'd Tom go?"

"Him go Thunder Mountain."

"Holy mackerel!"

"Yo' hear that, Whiz?"

"I heard."

Gulliver grabbed a handful of Charlie Wind-Up's shirt. "What time'd he leave? How'd he travel? When'd he plan to git back?"

The Indian took a deep breath and did a mental juggling act with the triple question. "Half-past ten this morning," he replied. "Ride paint horse. Back for supper."

"Then he's been gone for six hours!"

Charlie nodded.

"How long," asked Whiz, "does it take to reach the mountain. By horse, I mean."

"Three hours."

"Then Tom's been there for at least three hours."

Gulliver nodded vigorously. "Three hours," he barked as he pulled his shirt on, "is three hours too long!" He was striding from the room. "Yo', Whiz, wait right here," he called over his shoulder. "Charlie, yo' see that the jeep is full o' gas an' oil. I'll be back as soon as I git my shootin' irons."

Charlie Wind-Up scurried out the door.

"Well," muttered Whiz Walton to the empty room. "Looks like the chance for a bath has gone out the window. Maybe I'll have time to wash my face."

Gulliver came from his room, strapping on a heavy

gunbelt that held two huge six-shooters. "Whiz," he thundered. "Where yo' at?"

The columnist appeared with a towel, drying his face. "I'll be ready as soon as you are," he said.

"I'm ready now." Gulliver threw open a cupboard that held shotguns and rifles of various types and sizes. "Grab those," he said as he opened a drawer at the bottom of the gun rack. "Put 'em in the jeep. I'll bring the ammunition."

Whiz looked at the row of weapons. "Which ones?"

"Take 'em all. We got no time to be choosey."

As the reporter staggered from the house with the burden of armament, Charlie Wind-Up ran the jeep to the door and stepped out leaving the engine running.

"Is that full o' gas?" Gulliver approached with arms full of boxes of ammunition.

"Plenty gas."

"I said full!"

"Full."

Gulliver dropped the boxes on the floor between the two front seats and squeezed his bulk beneath the wheel. Whiz was placing the rifles and shotguns carefully on the floor in back. Still there, just as he had left it, was Tom's small radio connected to the homemade direction finder.

The mute testimony to a boy's skill and enthusiasm brought a little lump to the reporter's throat. Only yesterday, he thought, Tom Quest had been here and enthused with life. Now— He looked into the distance. What had Tom found on that sinister mountain?

CHAPTER 25
The Battle Begins

Consciousness returned to Tom Quest slowly and painfully. His first awareness was a sensation of spinning in circles in the bottom of a pool of thick fluid while a thousand demons drove spikes into his head and a roaring filled his ears. Then the giddiness subsided and the roaring became the distant throb of heavy machinery.

He remembered what had happened up to the time he had charged at Lasco, and correctly reasoned that he had been slugged on the head. He lay flat on his back on a hard surface. It felt like rock. A very slight experimental movement told him that his hands were tied. After that he remained motionless with his eyes closed, and waited for the stabbing headache to subside.

He felt a steady vibration against his back. It came from the surface on which he lay. It was like the vibration he had felt on the side of the mountain, only stronger, and it was geared to the mechanical rumble.

The sound of steps on stone began far back and halted close to Tom's side. Someone said, "How's the kid?"

That was Sassoon speaking. There could be no mis-

taking his husky voice. Tom decided to continue feigning unconsciousness.

"Still unconscious," another voice answered.

"Where's Lasco?"

"Back in the bunkroom. He coughed up. Now he's lyin' on his bunk an' holdin' his belly."

"He tell you what happened?"

"Yeah. But I can't believe anyone could ride a horse up that side of the mountain to the ledge."

"The Quest kid did it," snapped Sassoon. "If you want proof, you can see the horse still standing on the ledge."

"You must've hit that kid mighty hard to keep him out this long." Tom judged by a change in the voice quality that the speaker had turned in his direction.

"He's only been out for ten minutes."

"You want me to go to the ledge an' keep watch?"

"Yes. You'll find the binoculars where Lasco left them. But first, bring in that horse. I don't want it out there in plain sight."

"Boss, I—I don't know much about horses. I don't want to get kicked in the belly."

"That horse won't kick you."

"Why not? It kicked Lasco."

"Is that what he said?"

"Yeah."

"That—" Sassoon spit an oath. "He wasn't kicked. He dropped his guard and Quest rammed his bread basket."

"You mean to say," incredulity was in the voice, "that the kid hit Lasco *that* hard?"

"That's why I cracked him on the head. Now, Gorman, bring in that horse, then stand watch."

Tom heard footsteps recede. For a few moments there

was silence, broken only by Sassoon's husky breathing and the rumble of machinery. Then the man named Gorman called, apparently from the ledge.

"Hey, Sassoon!"

Sassoon's voice was hard. "I said, bring in that horse."

"But first you'd better step out here. I want to show you something."

"What is it?"

The next words brought Tom a lift of hope.

"There's a jeep headin' this way from the ranch. An' it's movin' fast."

Tom risked opening one eye ever so slightly when he heard the light footfalls of Sassoon fade back. Finding that he was alone, he opened both eyes and surveyed the scene. He was in a cave. The mouth was about twelve yards from where he lay beside a rock wall. Beyond the mouth he could see the two men and his paint horse on the ledge outlined against the sky. Tom tested the rope around his wrists and found it strong and tied in knots that discouraged any attempt to get free. He closed his eyes again as Sassoon and Gorman started back, with Gorman leading the horse.

The man with the husky voice was angry. "If they saw that horse," he rasped, "they'll know what happened to the kid. We must be ready for them."

"What'll we do?"

"I can't wait any longer for him to come around. Pick him up and throw him across the saddle. Lock him up somewhere, then come back here with four or five of the men—and guns!"

As Tom felt himself lifted bodily he relaxed every muscle in the hope of further continuing the deception

of unconsciousness. He was handled roughly and placed across the saddle on his stomach, with his head and tied hands dangling near one stirrup and his feet on the opposite side.

Gorman said, "There's only one room that has a door with a lock on it. That's the place where we keep the gold that hasn't been processed."

"What's the matter with that room?"

"The machinery is in there."

"So what? Put him in with the machinery, and don't waste any more time arguing about it."

The jeep had been bouncing and rocking at top speed on the uneven ground. Whiz Walton had his eyes shut against the wind, and clung desperately to the sides of the hard seat to keep from being thrown out.

Suddenly Gulliver cried, "Brace yo'self!"

At the same instant he jammed his foot on the brake.

The columnist lunged forward. His firm grip on the seat was all that kept him from going over the dashboard.

"What in blazes—" he began.

"I warned yo'!"

"Next time give me a split second to heed the warning! Why'd you stop?"

"Saw somethin'." Gulliver reached behind the seat. He found binoculars and held them to his eyes. "Look at that mountain," he said. "See if yo' don't see somethin' that looks like a horse standin' on the ledge."

It did look like a horse to Whiz.

"It is!" announced Gulliver. "More'n that, it's Tom's paint!"

"You sure?"

"So doggoned sure that I'm headin' right for that there spot!"

Gears rasped and the jeep shot ahead. It had taken Tom Quest three hours on horseback to reach the base of the mountain. Despite the rough ground, Gulliver made it in the jeep in forty-five minutes. He halted the car and reached for gear levers.

"From here how do we travel?" asked Whiz Walton.

Gulliver shifted into four-wheel drive and made further adjustments. "Stay right where yo' are."

Once more the car went forward, and now upward as well. It was the most spine-jarring, nerve-wracking experience in the columnist's career. The wheels with outsize tires bounced over rocks as large as bowling balls. Time after time the front end of the jeep leaped up and it seemed as though the car defied all laws of gravity to avoid a backward loop, end over end. But even the jeep had limitations. The front dropped into a hollow. The wheels struck a perpendicular wall and the car stopped dead.

Gulliver cut the engine and stepped out. "Grab guns," he said. "From here we walk."

A metallic *ping!* seemed to punctuate the speech. It came from the hood of the jeep.

"What was that?" barked Gulliver.

Another *ping!*

Whiz Walton was looking at the hood and saw a small round hole appear as if by magic. Then he knew. "Holy mackerel!" he cried. "They're shooting at us."

Gulliver's guns were in his hands and pointing toward the ledge. "Grab cover!" he bellowed. Then his trigger

fingers went to work. Both guns jumped and roared six times. Twelve slugs of .45 caliber slammed against the outside edge of the ledge and sent rock chips flying.

"That'll make 'em keep their heads back!" Gulliver holstered the guns without taking time to reload, and rushed ahead with one hand dragging the reporter. "Got to hug the slope beneath the ledge," he shouted. "Git so close they can't see us without leanin' way over."

Whiz Walton looked up as he ran—and just in time. A boulder as large as a console radio teetered on the ledge and then began to roll. It came crashing down the mountainside, gathering greater and greater speed.

The columnist was rooted to the spot. He had no power to move. He could only watch the course of the oncoming boulder and the countless smaller rocks and chunks of shale that traveled in its wake. The boulder passed within ten yards and crashed on down the slope.

"Whew! That was close." Whiz wiped perspiration from his face.

Gulliver, wearing a black scowl of rage, thumbed cartridges from his belt into the chambers of his guns. "Keep yo' eyes peeled, Whiz," he said. "They may try more o' that same game."

"I don't see how we can hope to reach that ledge," Whiz said.

"If anyone shows his head, open fire."

"With what?"

The big man looked up wide-eyed. "Yo' got no gun?"

"All the weapons, except that hardware you're wearing, are in the jeep. Look out!" he cried suddenly.

Another boulder was starting over the ledge. It was coming directly at the two men.

Gulliver grabbed Whiz about the waist and literally threw him into a hollow, then leaped in after him. It was like lying face down in the bottom of a ditch while a steam-roller crossed at lightning speed. The earth shook and trembled and then there was an indescribable din while dirt showered down. Then all was still except for the fast-receding rumbling of the rock on its way to the bottom of the hill.

"Went right over us," Gulliver observed.

"How can they see us to aim those rocks?"

"They can't. They got to trust to luck."

"Think they'll keep playing tenpins—with us as the pins?"

"Let 'em," returned Gulliver. "We got a good place here in this hollow. We'll stay right here until it gits dark."

"Then what?"

"Yo'll find out."

CHAPTER 26

The Galveston Gold

TOM QUEST had never known a more uncomfortable ride —but that was because he had never ridden in such a position. Belly down across the saddle, hands tied and brushing the ground, while his head and shoulders dangled near a stirrup, he remained limp because it was easier that way. No one seemed to care whether or not he had regained consciousness.

Sassoon had been tremendously upset by the news that a jeep was coming across the plains toward the mountain. He had called for men and guns. Tom didn't know what happened after that, because a man called Merkle had led the horse away from the opening and the ledge beyond it.

Tom opened his eyes, but there was little to be seen. The floor was stone and slanted downward. There were oil flares at intervals along the side of the tunnel. At first their flickering light revealed nothing but rock wall. As the tunnel widened Tom had an upside down view of several cars parked close to the wall, and then a truck. It

seemed to be the one he had seen at the railroad station in Bliss, but he couldn't be sure.

During the ride the throbbing of machinery became steadily louder.

Tom's head throbbed painfully and his stomach felt bruised and sore. He wondered how much longer he could endure the pain without crying out that he was fully conscious, in the hope that he would be permitted to either walk or ride in the usual manner.

Then the horse was halted.

A man said, "Who's this, Merkle?"

"This is the kid who started all the trouble. He's the one who carried away some of the ore we left on the side of the mountain."

"Tom Quest, eh?"

"Yeah."

"I said it was a crazy idea to throw that stuff out where it might be found. You remember, Merkle, I said at the time it was a crazy idea. Remember that?"

"Yeah, Jackson, I remember you said that."

"I said the wrong guy might find it an' get curious, an' that's just what happened. But Zazzara an' Lasco wouldn't listen to me. They went right ahead an' dumped it there in plain view."

"They didn't have anything to say about it, Jackson. It was Sassoon who wanted it there. He wanted the ore to get rained on an' weathered so's it'd look more genuine."

"Nuts!" Jackson spat contemptuously. "No matter how long it lay in the open it wouldn't be mistaken for real gold ore in the natural state. Any expert would see the difference."

"Unlock the engine room," said Merkle.

"For what?"

"Sassoon says to lock this kid in there."

Merkle gripped Tom beneath the shoulders and dragged him from the saddle and across the floor. He lowered the boy to the ground close to a wooden partition. "Wait a minute," he said to Jackson. "There's a car comin'. Don't open the door till we see who it is."

"Probably Snead," replied Jackson. "Sassoon sent him to town to find out how Zazzara made out. He's due back."

Tom lay face down and listened to the approaching car. It came from the direction opposite to that in which he had ridden on his horse. It came from the side of Thunder Mountain that faced badlands. He had never explored that area. Now he wished he had. Obviously there was another opening into this underground area. An opening through which a car—even a large truck, could be driven. The cars and the truck must have entered through that door. The heavy machinery that rumbled just beyond the wooden wall must have been brought in that way.

The car stopped within ten feet of where Tom lay.

Jackson said, "Learn anything, Snead?"

"Plenty. Bliss is in an uproar."

"How come?"

"Did you find out where Zazzara is?" It was Merkle who asked the second question.

"Zazzara is dead."

There were low exclamations of surprise.

"What's worse, that cowboy is still alive."

"Sassoon's goin' to be mighty sore when he hears that."

Snead agreed. "You c'n say that again."

"How'd it happen?"

"Bein' a stranger in town, I couldn't ask many questions without arousing suspicion, but as I get it, Zazzara went into the doc's house to get the cowboy with a knife. There was a fight. Zazzara must've slipped or fallen in the kitchen. He cracked his head on the sink an' fractured his skull. What makes it worse, a New York reporter is with Gulliver an' they got some information from the cowboy. They're investigating." As an afterthought the speaker said, "Who's that on the floor? Where'd the horse come from?"

He was told, and gave a low exclamatory whistle.

"What's more," said Merkle, "Gulliver came this way in the jeep. Sassoon and some of the others are at the ledge to meet him in case he discovers the back door to this place."

"I'd better go tell Sassoon what I found out in town."

Tom heard a car door slam and the car move away.

"Things," muttered Jackson, "may come to a head sooner'n we figured. I'd hate to see this whole scheme blow up now, after all the years we've waited to cash in on that Galveston job."

The Galveston job!

The words struck a gong in Tom Quest's brain. He remembered Whiz Walton telling about the huge gold robbery several years ago. Three million dollars in gold bullion had been stolen. Sassoon had carried a newspaper clipping that told about the robbery.

Whiz Walton had wondered if Sassoon had been connected with that robbery. Now there could be little doubt of it. In some way yet to be learned, the activities in Thunder Mountain were part of a long-range plan that

would make it possible for the thieves to cash in on one of the biggest robberies of all time.

Jackson said, "The door's unlocked."

"It seems to me," said Merkle slowly, "this kid's been out cold for a long time. He's either dead or bluffing."

"Playin' 'possum, eh?"

"Maybe. If so, he's heard some talk."

"So what? Drag him inside so's I can lock the door."

The door slammed and a spring lock clicked. At last Tom Quest could open his eyes wide and survey the situation. The engine room was large. It had been made by framing off a part of the cave in partitions of wood and insulating board so the rumbling of machinery would be partially confined. The room was hot and the air had a thick oily smell. Brilliant illumination came from electric lights, the power of which was supplied by a huge dynamo driven by a gasoline engine.

Tom knew enough about machinery to realize that the electrical output of the dynamo was far in excess of that which would be needed for illumination. He wondered why that power was being generated and how it was being used.

He got to his feet and looked about for some means of cutting the ropes around his wrists. He was a trifle giddy at first and found it difficult to stand, but presently he was able to walk without reeling.

Heavy cables from the dynamo ran through a conduit across the floor and halfway up a side wall. Here they were connected to a fuse block and a heavy copper knife switch. Above the switch the conduit went through the wall.

"Gosh," Tom said softly, "I'll bet this is the answer to

that disturbance in the television. That dynamo is running something, and whatever it is, it's sending out static."

On the floor close to the wall beneath the electric switch there was a pile of solid wooden cases. Though his hands were tied, Tom could lift the lid of one of these.

"Gold!" he exclaimed.

Solid gold in bars neatly packed in the chest! The stolen gold from Galveston!

CHAPTER 27

Dots and Dashes

WHIZ WALTON hugged the bottom of the hollow that had given protection from the big rocks that had been rolled down from the ledge. He was cramped and wanted to change his position, but he had been kept practically motionless for over an hour by Gulliver. Each time he made the slightest movement, the big man had whispered, "Hold it. We want those critters up above to think they got us."

The columnist saw the wisdom of this plan. Gulliver was simply marking time until darkness. He and Whiz Walton waited in the hollow until the side of Thunder Mountain was inky black.

Finally he said, "Now, Whiz, yo' sneak over to the jeep an' git some shootin' irons. Bring the six-gun an' if yo' can find it in the dark, bring that double-barreled shotgun."

"What about cartridges?"

"Yo' know where I put 'em. Yo'll have to feel around in the dark to find the right size, but be careful when you

move out o' this here hollow. Don't start stones rollin'. When we got firepower, we'll try to sneak up to that there ledge."

The columnist moved out of the hollow and crawled on hands and knees, inching his way toward the jeep. At the side of the small car he stood up and felt around the floor until he found the pistol and ammunition for it. In addition to the six-gun cartridges he picked up the largest of the boxes which held twelve-gauge shotgun shells.

"Now to find the shotgun," he muttered. Reaching in back, his hand encountered the antenna Tom Quest had built as a direction finder. In the darkness he brushed the face of a small portable radio, then groped until his slender fingers identified the double-barreled shotgun. Lifting it from the jeep, he dropped to all fours and started back to the hollow where Gulliver waited.

A squealing sound came from the jeep.

"Holy mackerel," breathed the columnist. "I must have turned on that radio!"

He heard a throaty grumble of complaint from Gulliver. Leaving the firearms and ammunition on the ground, he turned back to the jeep to try to shut off the squeal by which Tom had located the source of the disturbance. Before he could reach into the back of the jeep, the sound stopped. Then it started again, but now instead of being a steady tone, it was broken into dots and dashes similar to Morse code. In fact, it *was* Morse code. Whiz Walton recognized it. So did Gulliver.

Stones slid downhill as Gulliver hurried to the jeep. "That!" he said. "It's a message! Tom Quest's callin' us!"

"Shut up! I'm trying to get it."

For a moment the ledge was forgotten. Nothing mat-

tered save the coded message Tom had somehow found a way to send. The radio crackled dots and dashes that spelled out, "Go around the mountain—far side. Bring help. Galveston gold—" and there was more.

"Git in!" cried Gulliver with utter disregard as to whether or not enemies on the ledge could hear.

Whiz grabbed the six-gun and shotgun on the ground and leaped over the side of the jeep as the engine roared into life. There were shouts from the ledge above.

"Hang on!" boomed Gulliver. "We're backin' down!"

Guns barked from the ledge as the jeep shot backward. The uphill ride had been rough. Downhill was worse. Gulliver backed at top speed all the way, bouncing over rocks and holes. During the ride there was continual gunfire from the ledge. But it was blind shooting with scant likelihood of finding a mark.

On level ground Gulliver braked to a halt, shifted the gears, and shot the jeep ahead in a tight turn to start around the base of Thunder Mountain.

Inside the mountain, Tom Quest gripped the handle of the knife switch with one hand. It was awkward with his wrists tied together, but he managed to use that switch as a key to make and break the electrical circuit in such a manner as to spell out words in code. It was a wild gamble. It didn't seem as though there was one chance in a thousand that Gulliver or Whiz would hear the signals, but at least it was better than doing nothing.

He heard voices beyond the locked door. Someone said, "Who has the key to this room?"

Someone else said, "Jackson!"

"Where is he?"

"How do I know?"

A third voice said, "He went somewhere with that horse."

A husky voice—Sassoon's—snarled, "Break the door down if you have to! Find out what's happening to the circuit."

Tom continued operating the copper switch, repeating the same words over and over again. He heard a new voice approaching and shouting, "Sassoon! Hey, Sassoon!"

"What's the matter with you?" rasped Sassoon.

"It's that jeep!" The man was breathless. "They just drove it away!"

"You mean to say Gulliver and that reporter are still alive?"

"I'm telling you, they just drove away in the jeep!"

Sassoon swore. "Couldn't you shoot them?"

"I tried to, but it was dark. I couldn't see."

"Smash in this door!" ordered Sassoon for the second time. "Bring out that kid! Find out what's wrong with the generator! Merkle, you and Snead take one of the cars and go after Gulliver. Find him. Bring him and that reporter here. If you can't bring them in alive, bring them in dead!"

CHAPTER 28
Conclusion

"I DON'T KNOW where we're goin' but we're on our way," shouted Gulliver above the roaring of the jeep engine.

Whiz Walton hung on grimly to the seat. "Have you ever been on the far side of Thunder Mountain?" he asked.

"Not recent. I was there years ago, but there's nothin' there. It's badland country."

"What's that mean?"

"Rocks and sand. Sort o' like desert country, only worse. Nothin'll grow there. Not even wild grass."

"Did you ever hear of a cave on that side of the mountain?"

"No."

"I don't know how we'll find it in the dark."

"Neither do I. But we got to find it. Tom's life depends on it."

The radio continued sputtering the dots and dashes, repeating the same instructions again and again, until the small car had skirted the mountain and started around

the side farthest from Gulliver's ranch. Then the radio went silent and remained that way.

Grudgingly Gulliver slowed the pace while he and the newshound held their eyes on the slope that rose on the left side. It seemed like a hopeless search. The entrance to the cave might be so well concealed that it would be difficult to find in daylight.

Gulliver braked suddenly. "Thought I saw somethin'," he said.

"Where?"

"Keep yo' eyes fixed at ground level, Whiz." The big man backed the jeep slowly. "See if yo' don't see a sort of glowin' light."

"I do!" exclaimed the columnist. "It's a cave and there's light inside it."

"That's for us. Git a grip on yo' shootin' iron an' be set for anything."

"I'm set." And the next instant Whiz said, "Hold it."

Gulliver had just started to turn toward the lighted place.

"Look behind us."

Gulliver turned. Far away on the badlands he could see the headlights of a car.

"What d' you make of that, Gulliver?"

"May be some o' the gang comin' here."

"Do we wait for that car to get here?"

"We wait for nothin'!"

The jeep was in motion toward the lighted opening.

It proved to be fully ten yards wide, and the floor of the tunnel beyond was hard rock. A few electric lights were fixed to the walls.

The tunnel ahead was straight for nearly one hundred

yards and then it turned to the left. The floor sloped up.

Whiz wondered what would happen when members of the gang drove into the tunnel behind the jeep. Then he had something else to think about. A car without headlights rounded the turn and came toward them.

It was Merkle and Snead acting on Sassoon's orders to go out and find Gulliver.

A gun barked and echoed in the tunnel. Flame streaked from the oncoming car and a bullet zipped past Gulliver's head.

"Polecats!" bellowed Gulliver. "They want gunplay. I'll accommodate 'em."

The big gun in his right hand appeared as if by magic. It barked. The oncoming car swung crazily to the side with a blown tire.

"Like shootin' jack rabbits," Gulliver shouted. "That's why I don't have a windshield. It always got in my way."

He fired three times more as the other car, out of control, crashed against the side wall of the tunnel. Then he and Whiz flashed past. Around the turn they saw more lights and several men in a place where the tunnel widened into a large room.

Several cars were parked there, and many wooden packing cases formed a heap near a wall.

"Gulliver!" cried Whiz. "There's Tom!"

The boy stood between two men near a wooden wall that partitioned one part of the space.

"Grab the wheel!" yelled Gulliver. He picked up the double-barreled shotgun which had been loaded during the trip around the mountain. "I'll give them buzzards somethin' to think about!"

The reporter reached across and grabbed the steering

wheel with one hand. There were two earth-shaking explosions, followed by a chorus of angry shouts and cries of pain. Several of the men ahead had held guns in readiness. Now they dropped their weapons and clutched at parts of their anatomy that had been stung by lead pellets.

"That," roared Gulliver at the top of his voice, "is only the beginnin'!" He dropped the shotgun and drew both pistols.

"Take your foot off the gas!" screamed Whiz Walton. But Gulliver heard nothing. His guns were barking.

Whiz turned the key in the ignition to bring the jeep to a halt before it crashed into a pile of wooden crates.

The guns of the enemy were firing, but Gulliver's attack had been so fast that Sassoon's men were unnerved. They had no time to aim. Two lay silent on the floor. Several of the others hugged wounds and sobbed in anguish.

Gulliver leaped from the jeep before it stopped rolling. His guns were empty. He threw one at Sassoon, only narrowly missing the husky-voiced boss, and closed in with the other weapon serving as a cudgel. Sassoon went down unconscious.

Whiz, meanwhile, had jumped from the jeep and rushed toward the men who held Tom Quest. Both held guns. Whiz knew at once that he had made a mistake. Before he could hope to get those two, he would be dead in his tracks. He was saved by what seemed to be a miracle.

The nearest man who had been ready to fire shuddered as if from a blow. The barrel of his gun tilted toward

the floor and then the weapon dropped from his fingers. His knees buckled.

Whiz could only stare and wonder what had happened. On the other side of Tom a man was staggering, then he, too, fell. The gunfire came from somewhere in the tunnel behind the jeep.

Gulliver was everywhere, swinging his gun as a club. Tom Quest, his hands still tied, could only watch and pray. He saw a car come into the tunnel behind the jeep. He saw guns firing in that car. The car came to a halt, and men leaped out from both sides and ran forward with submachine guns.

"The Federals!" yelled one of Sassoon's men.

A newcomer shouted, "Throw down your guns! It's your last chance to surrender."

Those of the enemy who still stood after Gulliver's devastating attack obeyed.

Gulliver sat at the head of the table in his dining room. Tom Quest and his father sat on one side, facing Whiz Walton and a clean-cut man named Sparks. The other Federal men had left the community with the prisoners in custody. It was the evening after the round-up inside Thunder Mountain.

"Those crooks," Sparks explained, "had a very clever scheme worked out to cash in the three million dollars in gold."

"Then they were the ones who staged the Galveston robbery?" asked Whiz.

Sparks nodded. He looked at Tom Quest. "The room next to the one where you were held had some very in-

teresting apparatus, including electric arc furnaces. The gang melted the gold with certain kinds of ore. They were trying to make it look like regular gold-bearing ore.

"Sassoon, under another name, bought Thunder Mountain. He planned to claim he had found gold on the mountainside and a rich deposit of gold inside the mountain. He and his gang would bring out the ore, refine it, and extract the gold."

Hamilton Quest shook his head slowly. "I don't see how they expected to get away with anything as barefaced as that. Any good geologist would know that the ore was not genuine."

"Probably," said Sparks, "they figured on bribing a few men where necessary. The big break came when Tom sent samples of the ore to you, and you in turn, sent a fingerprint to Washington."

"A fingerprint?" put in Whiz Walton.

Hamilton Quest said, "Sassoon came to my apartment, Whiz, as I told you. He left his fingerprint on the glass desk top. I cut out the piece of glass and sent it to Washington."

Sparks said, "We had one fingerprint as the only clue to the gold robbery at Galveston. It was matched by the print Quest sent to us. We flew at once to New York and talked to Mr. Quest, then came here."

"How," demanded Whiz, "did you know about the entrance to Thunder Mountain?"

"Strange thing," said Sparks, "just after we came through Bliss, our short-wave radio began to sound off. The darndest kind of code I ever heard, but it was recognizable."

"That," put in Gulliver, "was Tom Quest's signal. Me an' Whiz Walton got the same thing."

"How did you do it?" asked the Federal man.

"Now wait, Tom," cut in Gulliver. "They's lots o' things still to be told. We've all got to compare lots o' notes, but dad-rat it, Charlie Wind-Up has an extra special meal all set to dish out. Let's eat."

"By the way," said Sparks, "there's a substantial reward for the recovery of that gold and other rewards for the capture of the men who stole it."

Gulliver said, "We'll talk all that over later. Right now, we got to tend to somethin' more important." Turning toward the kitchen door, he called, "Bring it on, Charlie! We're ready an' waitin'!"

And there was something else which, to Gulliver, meant more than reward money. After dinner he intended to drive to Bliss and bring Tex Wilson home.

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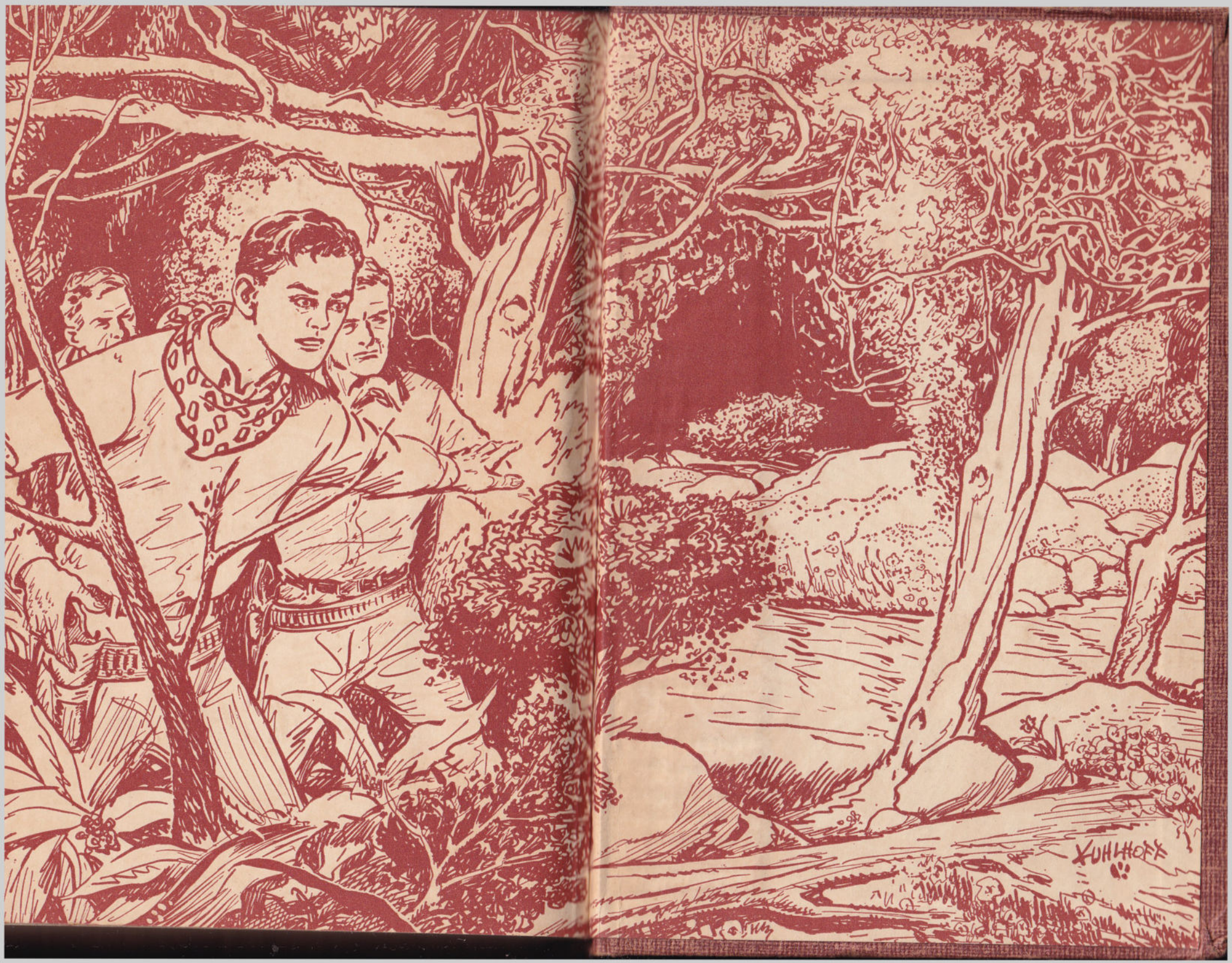
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